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H.A. DeROSSO

WHEN A TEXAN TAKES OVER

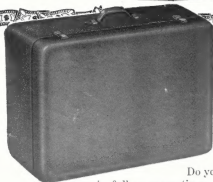
THERE WAS A SIXSHOOTER IN HIS BELT
AND A WINCHESTER IN HIS SADDLE BOOT--
YET THE STRANGER WANTED NO PART OF
ANY GUN RUCKUS. BY

LOUIS L'AMOUR

PLUS AN ANTHOLOGY
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2-GUN WESTERN

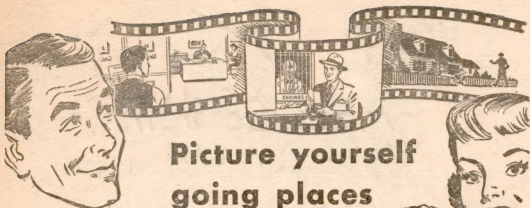
★ ★ BRAND NEW ACTION YARNS ★ ★

- 1) **TIME FOR A HANGIN'** Kenneth L. Sinclair 6
Five of them, there were — Sawdey, a pair of his punchers, and two other ranchers. All armed to the teeth. Yet Jed felt he had to call them.
- 2) **BUT ONE MAN ALONE MIGHT** Raley Brien 15
He'd begin his harsh tirade, and with the wild screech and sudden gunfire — and another of the killer's promised victims would topple lifeless . . .
- 3) **BUSHWHACKER'S BRIDE** Wayne D. Overholser 22
Cattle-wise, sure, but not much of a man, Marty Daren. Or he'd never have let his wife look at his range boss like that . . .
- 4) **TOMBSTONE STORY** Lauran Paine 28
Yes, Tam Waters of Tombstone was shot to death for no better reason than that he wore a cotton shirt of big, black and white checks . . .
- 5) **BADMAN ON THE BENCH** Harry Harrison Kroll 31
Hot biscuits for a horsethief? But were they hot biscuits — and was Windy a horsethief?
- 6) **THE TROUBLED GUN** H. A. DeRosso 39
Vengeance, they all figured he wanted. Because he'd been framed to prison by his rival for the hand of pretty Lucy Holbrook. Well, maybe he did want vengeance . . .
- 7) **THE LAST SCALP** W. K. Putney 48
"I swear this: I shall avenge your death a hundred fold." — So vowed Bill Quick over the grave of his father. But ninety-nine Indians were all he could find . . .
- 8) **WHEN A TEXAN TAKES OVER** Louis L'Amour 50
There was a sixshooter in his belt and a Winchester in his saddle boot — yet the stranger wanted no part of any gun ruckus.
- 9) **MEET YOU ON THE MISSOURI** Noel M. Loomis 58
The West was plenty big, but it was whittled down to size by the man who dared to travel up the Missouri's three thousand miles of wild river through raw-red savage country . . .
- 10) **THE KILLING AT SPANISH LICK** Ed Ashley 63
Vern Sanders? He wasn't a man, he was a gun . . .
- 11) **FURY** L. D. Guemlek 66
A man had to die sometime and hanging was a small price to pay for ridding the country of Will Staley . . .

★ ★ ANTHOLOGY OF TIME-HONORED CLASSICS ★ ★

- 12) **THE SHERIFF TRIES TWIN SIXES** Johnny Lawson 71
The holdup wasn't Sheriff Bill Stowe's only trouble, but it was the only low-job he could handle with guns!
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- 13) **JUST WILD** Brent North 76
"Got gunpowder in his blood," folks said of Gil Farnol. "He'll die fighting hot lead or a hangnouse . . ."
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- 14) **THE COLD-DECK CLUE** Ken Jason 86
Back in Montana Jim Marshall had known manbreaker murder, but this brand of .30-30 slaughter was beyond what he'd ever notched his gun for!
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- 15) **GRAVEYARD GUNS** Gunnison Steele 95
This wasn't a job for the law, this was strictly a gun-chore, this would take a pair of Colts with filed triggers and preferably a gent who knew how to fan 'em!
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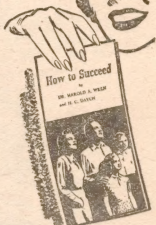
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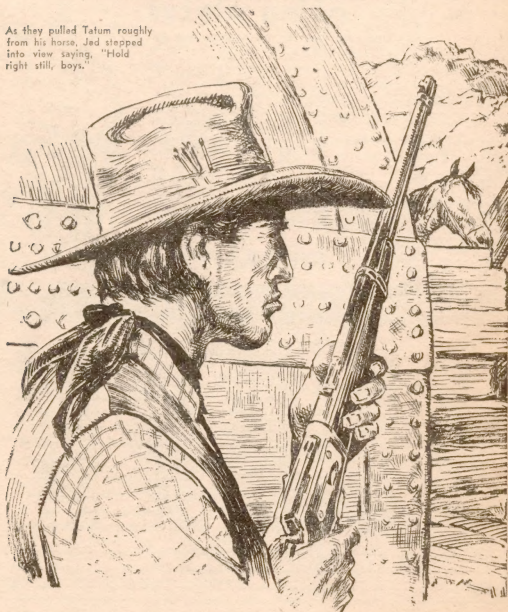
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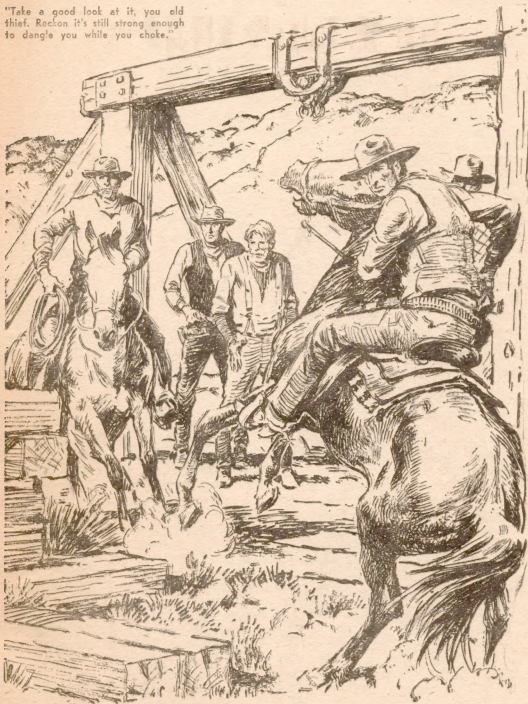
As they pulled Tatum roughly from his horse, Jed stepped into view saying, "Hold right still, boys."



★ MAYBE THE HEADRIG OF THE GOLDEN LADY ★
★ MINE HAD SERVED AS A GALLOWES FOR ★

Five of them, there were — Sawdey, a pair of his punchers, and two other ranchers. All armed to the teeth. Yet Jed felt he had to call them

"Take a good look at it, you old thief. Reckon it's still strong enough to dangle you while you choke."



★ THE LAST TIME GRIPPING CATTLE ★
★ WAR YARN! BY KENNETH L. SINCLAIR ★

THERE ARE men who can stick rigidly to their own trails, concerned with no problems but those of Number One, blind to the needs of others who might be helped along the way. Maybe they are the lucky ones—but Jed Rocklin was not among these.

He had his personal worries, that day he saw old Jump-and-a-Half Tatum being taken out to hang. Jed was shoving along a little gather of his cows, keeping to the draws and aiming to slide past the town of Standpat during the night and be clear of the basin by morning. A man who'd been lucky enough to find a cash market for beef had to be right careful. Thunder Basin was cattle poor, these years when the bottom had dropped out of the market—let any of the ranchers, Black Jack Sawdey in particular, get wind of a way to turn cows into money and he'd be as rough as need be to move in on it.

Jed's nature was such that he wished the market he'd found had been big enough for him to let his neighbors have a slice of it. But it wasn't. Ten cows now, delivered within a week or the contract became void, and five a month thereafter. A dribble, but a big thing to a man down to tobacco money. He'd planned, though, to let Tatum supply the stock every other month, once the thing got rolling. The Tatums were neighbors of a special kind....

And now old Jump-and-a-Half was in the middle of a little group of riders that moved up the hill toward the Golden Lady mine. His grizzled head was bare and his hands were tied behind his back. There could be only one meaning for this. Every tree in the basin had been cut down to supply mine timbers in the old days of the boom; since then the headrig of the Golden Lady had served as a gallows on more than one occasion.

Jed lifted his lank frame in the saddle for a better look. He was a calm young hombre, ordinarily slow to anger, yet wrath was building in him now. He saw that Black Jack Sawdey was leading the bunch. Somehow old Jump had incurred the wrath of Black Jack, who owned the biggest outfit in the basin and aimed to keep it that way.

Jed's brow furrowed in puzzlement. Tatum was old, and prattled endlessly about the boom days when he had worked in the mines. He harmed no one. His little spread, up here at the end of the basin next to Jed's, crowded no one. It made this a hard thing to figure—but Tatum had a granddaughter just turned nineteen, and his being hanged would be something she'd never get over. Jed needed only a moment to make his decision. If he left his cows now they would scatter, and working alone it would take him at least a day to gather them up and that day would cost him the beef contract. But he reined out of the draw.

He circled the hill where the mine was, keeping out of sight, pulling his rifle from the saddle boot as he moved upward.

A grimness touched his face as he dismounted in the shadow of the headrig and stepped behind a rusty boiler. Sawdey's bunch was quartering up the long tailings dump. There were five of them—Sawdey, a pair of his punchers, and two more ranchers, one a stooped little man by name of Eli Denn and the other a comparative newcomer to the basin, Cline Wymer.

Old Jump lifted his head as they neared the headrig, glancing at the weathered timbers with stricken eyes. Eli Denn chuckled and said, "Take a good look at it, you old thief. Reckon it's still strong enough to dangle you while you choke."

Jed waited until they had dismounted. As they pulled Tatum roughly from his horse Jed stepped into view, lifting the rifle and saying, "Hold right still, boys."

THEY JERKED around to face him. Hope flickered in Tatum's faded eyes. Sawdey swore, his broad jaw tilting up, and stabbed a hand toward the cedar stock of his sixgun. The hand veered away when he saw the Winchester in Jed's hands. "Rocklin," he breathed, "who in hell gave you leave to put in on this?"

"Nobody. I'm curious about what reason you got for this. And I know you well enough, Jack, to savvy that the only way to talk sense with you is to get the drop first."

Sawdey took a truculent stance. He

was part Indian and looked it, with oily black hair and coal-chip eyes. He was one of the lucky ones, if you wanted to look at it that way—he rode his own trail and to hell with everyone else. He'd been raising cattle here before the boom and had fattened on the sale of beef to hungry miners. Now he said thickly, "Pull out of this, Rocklin, while you still can. We got this rustler dead to rights. He range-butchered one of my critters and packed the beef to some prospectors up in the hills. We found the hide buried right near his shack."

Jed looked at the oldster. "That right, Jump?"

"No, by hell, it ain't right!" Tatum was standing with his weight on his good leg, his glance pinned to Jed's lean face in a fixity of hope. "They found that hide, but I don't savvy how it ever got there. An' Lucy don't either. I been out prospectin'—"

"You've heard how it was, gents," Jed said. "He's got cows of his own—if he could sell beef, why would he butcher somebody else's? Eli, get those ropes off him."

For a long moment no one moved. Then Jed moved the muzzle of his rifle meaningly. The sodden cigarette stub that had been sticking to Denn's protruding lower lip dropped to the ground as the rancher jumped to do as he'd been told.

Black Jack shouted, "Damn you, Rocklin, put down that rifle and we'll settle this with our sixes!"

Jed smiled and shook his head. "Some other time, Jack—right now you've got too much help handy." He flicked a glance over the hard, taut faces of the others. Kelly and Stratton, Black Jack's cowboys, and Wymer, the new rancher. Wymer was a former lawman who had come to the basin with enough money to ride out the hard times. His mustached face was plump, his boots were polished—he worked hard at being a gentleman rancher. "I'm some surprised, Cline," Jed said dryly, "to find you ridin' on an errand like this. Hell for law an' order, ain't you?"

Wymer looked uneasy. "Jack convinced me that it was a duty to perform," he said weakly.

"Damn right it is!" Black Jack snapped. "We've had rustlin' in the basin before, an' we've stopped it pronto. There ain't any law closer'n Tucson, an' we got to stand together in this."

"Are you certain it's rustlin' you've got here, now?" Jed asked. "I know Jump pretty well, and I'll take his word any time."

"No man's word is worth a damn to me!" Black Jack blurted.

Jed shrugged. Old Jump was freed now; and Jed said, "Get their guns, Jump." When the weapons had been pulled from the holsters of the tense, angry-eyed men, Jed added, "Mount up, boys, and ride."

Black Jack stepped to his saddle, but turned his thick body to level a final glance upon Jed. "We'll not be forgettin' this, Rocklin. You savvy where it puts you—on the wrong side of a tall fence. Next time we'll come straight for you."

"Might be," Jed said. "An' might not. You'll get your guns back, maybe, after Jump and me look into this and find out what side of that fence you're on."

Black Jack reined his horse savagely around and rode down the dump, followed by the others. Old Jump limped to a timber and sank down on it. "I'm obliged," he said. "Man gets to be my age, you'd think dyin' wouldn't scare him much. But I kep' thinkin' about Lucy bein' left alone—" He got to his feet. "Tarnation! When they come after me she swarmed all over 'em an' they tied her up. We'd best be gettin' down there to the shack."

TATUM'S PLACE was in a draw immediately south of the Golden Lady. When the mine closed down the oldster had decided that he liked the basin well enough to stay, and he had laid out his homestead and had gone to cattle raising to make a living. Jed's ranch was beyond Tatum's, at the very end of the basin.

Lucy Tatum was tied to a chair in old Jump's one-room shack, and from the marks on the floor she had hopped it all around the room, trying to reach the cupboard and a butcher-knife. The chair had toppled over, though; and now she lay on the floor,

gasping with pain and frustration. When Jed and the oldster freed her and lifted her to her feet she rubbed her ankles and then her slim, tanned arms, where welts had been raised by her struggles against the ropes.

She was a small girl, with brown hair and freckles that were scattered across the bridge of her upturned nose. Even in shirt and levis she brought a tightness to Jed's throat. Now she said, "Darn! After this I'll keep the shotgun handy—and loaded with rusty nails!" She blew a lock of hair from her forehead and looked anxiously toward her grandfather, then turned her soft brown eyes upon Jed. "You helped him," she said.

"I'd be dead this minute," old Jump said, "if it hadn't been for him. I'll go fetch that hide, Jed—they throwed it on the ground out there where they found it." He limped from the shack.

Lucy Tatum slipped her arms about Jed's neck and kissed him. "Isn't it about time," she inquired, "that you got around to asking me to marry you?"

"Whoa, girl! All I done was what any neighbor would. I—"

"Fiddlesticks. There's not another man in the basin who'd lift a hand to help somebody else, these days, and you know it. But this isn't just gratitude, if that's what you're thinking. You haven't had much time for courting, but you've been over here as often as you could, and I've noticed the way you keep looking at me." She colored a little. "I—I've liked it, Jed. So why wait around?"

"I'm broke!" he croaked hoarsely.

"So am I. Makes us even, doesn't it?"

Jed still was bogged like a critter in quicksand when old Jump returned, lugging a hide that still had dirt clinging to it here and there. The brand was Quarter Circle S—Black Jack Sawdey's burn. Tatum looked at it and scratched his balding head.

"How in blazes," he said, "did it come to be buried on my place? Minute them hombres got Lucy tied and took me outside they went to lookin' for a place where the ground had been dug. Claimed they'd had word I'd sold beef to some prospectors that's workin' the ol' Twenty Dol-

lar mine up in Wolf Canyon. I ain't been near there in years!"

"You're going there now," Jed told him. "We'll track this thing down, and when we find out what Jack's up to we'll—"

"No." The oldster shook his head vigorously. "Buckin' that 'breed is too big an order. I'll not have you runnin' such a risk on my account."

"I've already jumped that fence he mentioned," Jed pointed out dryly. "And I ain't of a mind to crawl back under. We'd best start out for that canyon right away."

"You'll have something to eat first," Lucy said. She frowned suddenly at Jed and added, "Say, didn't I see you gathering some of your cows this morning? You were gone all last week—have you found a buyer somewhere?"

Jed admitted that he had. "They're building a narrow-gauge railroad over in Grindstone Pass. Seventy miles from here, but I made a dicker to supply what beef they'll need for their crew."

"Then you better get at it," old Tatum put in. "I'll help you drive your critters—it's the least I can do, to pay you back."

"Drive past Black Jack's place?" Jed asked. "Wouldn't be healthy for either of us, right now. No, that'll have to wait till we get Jack's game dragged out in the open." He looked thoughtfully at Lucy. "She better go with us. With that 'breed cuttin' loose his meanness it wouldn't be safe for her here in the basin."

Old Jump rubbed a whiskered cheek. "A sight safer'n that trail we got to ride! When it hits the mountains it's plumb scary. She'd best stay here—Jack's a mean one, but he's never been the kind to make war on a woman."

"Besides," Lucy said, "I'll have the scattergun handy every minute."

IT TOOK JED and the oldster two days to reach Wolf Canyon. The trail had been rough and dangerous, clinging to the slopes of mountains, following ledges high on the walls of canyons. But here and there along the way there had been horse sign, fairly fresh—and that had brought a cold glint to Jed's eyes. He had

done what his nature demanded, by pitching in to help a neighbor, and it gave him a wry satisfaction to know that this trail was not a cold one.

The Twenty Dollar was a small mine, located in the bottom of its canyon. A man with a much-stained shirt came out of a tunnel as Jed and Tatum approached and greeted them genially.

"Bought any beef lately?" Jed asked.

The miner nodded. "Just the other day. Sure was a treat to us, after months of nothin' but 'tack an' beans. Got a lot of it left, hangin' back in the tunnel where it's cool."

"What did the hombre who sold it to you look like?"

"Well," the miner said carefully, "he was a little feller. Kind of stooped an' dried-up lookin'. Had what was left of a cigarette stuck on his lip the whole time he was here. Said his name was Tatum."

"Eli Denni!" old Jump exclaimed. "He allus did wait for a nod from Black Jack afore he dared to spit—now he's doin' Jack's dirty work for 'im! Likely he was the one that buried that hide!"

Jed assured the now-worried miner that his purchase of the beef would not involve him in any trouble, and turned down the man's invite for supper. Old Jump, who liked to talk mining, complained about that as they headed back down the canyon.

"We've found out what we need to know," Jed told him. "This was rigged to get you in trouble. And Eli's a man who can be made to talk, when we get him in a corner. All of a sudden, though, I've got me a hunch that we ought to be gettin' back to the basin pronto."

The oldster looked at him sharply, and made no more complaints.

When they made camp that night Jed swung the supper talk around to mining, largely to cheer Tatum up by giving him a whack at his favorite subject. "Have those fellows got any chance of making a go of it up there, Jump? That mine's an old one—somebody must have gone off and left it because he'd decided it was no good."

Tatum snorted. "Proves you don't

savvy minin'. An old workin's gives a man a look at the formations underground an' lets him figger his chances. Plenty of mines been abandoned because they lost the ore vein, temporary, an' the money boys drew the purse strings tight. Then somebody comes along an' digs ten feet an' hits it—or half a mile an' finds nothin'. That's minin'."

"Too big a gamble for my taste," Jed said.

"No bigger gamble than this fool cow business, I reckon! I was aimin' to do a little of both when I paced off my homestead to include the entrance of the Golden Lady. There's a mine for you, bucko—shafts down to the six hundred foot level, drifts an' stopes that go 'way out to hellangone. I prowled 'em all, but never did find what I was after."

"Proves my point," Jed said, poking up the fire under the can of Arbuckle. "A man can eat his cows if he has to. But rock, no."

He set a hard pace the next day. They reached the rim of the basin in late afternoon and stopped to blow their horses and take a wide look-around. Tatum said impatiently, "Soon's we get the truth out of Eli we'll go straight after the danged 'breed that hired 'im!"

Jed frowned. "Maybe Eli was working on his own."

"Him? That snivelin' son ain't got the backbone to turn a flapjack without bein' told. Hell, it's plain to see what the 'breed's after—he's got the best range in the basin, but wants it all. This is his Injun way of goin' after it!"

Jed could understand the oldster's fuming resentment of Sawdey. Black Jack was a driver, a crowder—maybe that was because he wanted to prove that he was as good a man as anyone who had all-white blood. But his ranch was at the far end of the basin, beyond the town. If he wanted to spread out, why would he begin up here?

Jed lifted his reins, saying only, "We'd better push on."

When they reached Jump's cabin the blow fell. Lucy was not there. The place was in disorder, with plenty signs of a struggle—the inside of the door and the wall beside it were

peppered with marks of buckshot. Lucy had used the scattergun, but it hadn't helped her much. A window was open; they had come at her from two directions at once.

Old Jump's face whitened. "Now maybe you'll listen when I tell you what kind of snake blood that Injun's got!" he said furiously.

THEY FOUND plenty of horse tracks outside. But horse tracks are pretty much all alike, and these headed out to the road where they'd be lost in a maze of others. Old Jump, though, kept searching. Finally he made a thin shout and pointed to the deep-laid dust near the hitch-rack. "Here's sign we can follow—a horse with a hind shoe missin'. Piece of luck!"

The trail was absurdly easy to follow. The horse with the missing shoe had trailed behind the others on the run they had made toward Standpat, so the sign was not obscured. That bothered Jed, though—a man would hardly take a marker horse on a raid involving a woman. But Jed and Tatum had no choice but follow the sign. They had to find Lucy by any means that came handy.

The sign led them into the town, past the long lines of bleached sagging shacks that were relics of the boom days, and into the hard core of the town that had survived. There it was lost under more recent tracks.

As they wheeled their horses uncertainly a portly little man came out of the saloon and called, "Hey, Rocklin, c'm'ere!"

When they rode over Jed saw that the man was Sam Farlew, a grubstake prospector who nailed every stranger with tales of wealth to be had in return for a forty-dollar 'stake. Farlew got an arm around a porch post and leered knowingly at Jed. "Got yourself whipsawed, hey? Man that gets Black Jack down on 'im might's well pull for new country. I heard Jack an' his boys talkin' when they come through town awhile ago—seems they'd been out to your shack lookin' for you, an' found some kind of contract you had for sellin' beef. Reckon Jack'll take right good care of that market for you!"

"Did they have a woman with

them?" Jed demanded. Knowing Farlew pretty well, he added, "A straight answer could earn you a bottle."

Farlew drew himself up importantly. "Don' need no bottle. Got plenty money—gonna have plenty more. Didn' see no woman anyhow." He turned awkwardly and swayed back into the saloon.

Old Jump Tatum swore. "Knowned I shouldn't let you get tangled in this. The Injun's out to get you now."

"Forget that." Jed sent a swift glance along the row of horses at the saloon rack and saw that none of them was missing a hind shoe. "I don't reckon they'd keep Lucy in town—too many chances of word getting around. If we make a circle to cut all the roads leading out of here we may pick up that sign again."

As they left the town they met Cline Wymer. His boots gleamed in the sunset light and his hat was tilted to just the proper stockman's angle. He seemed oddly aloof, now that he was alone, and made no hostile move.

"Cooled down on that hangin' idee?" old Jump demanded bitingly.

"I never was much for it," Wymer said. "That Indian—" He shook his head. "I don't hold with mob action. It's strictly between you and him now."

"Obliged," Jed said dryly. "Maybe you don't hold with woman-stealin' either."

Wymer scowled. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean you might even want to give us a hand. They've taken Lucy from Tatum's place. By force."

Wymer shook his head. "I don't believe Sawdey would do a thing like that. Like I said, I'm out of this." He lifted his reins.

But Jed reached out a hand. "There's another thing, neighbor. We took a ride and found out that Eli Denn sold that beef, giving Tatum's name."

Wymer looked up quickly. "Why, Eli was the one who brought in word of it. What are you trying to pull off, Rocklin? You'll need more than a tall story to rope me in."

"Forget that I mentioned it," Jed said angrily.

WYMER TOUCHED spurs to his horse and rode past. As he did so, old Jump's head swiveled, his glance clinging to the rancher's boots. Jed looked too, and saw that splotches of bluish-gray mud clung to the leather.

"Some lawman!" Jump snorted when Wymer was gone. "Way he hankers to keep clear of trouble makes a man wonder how he ever got money to go to ranchin' an' take it easy like he's done. You see that blue clay on his boots? I've seen that stuff around here some'ers—can't seem to recall just where..."

"Right now," Jed said, "we better stick to finding Lucy."

They picked up the sign of the three-shoed horse on a narrow, little-used road that angled from the town toward the upper end of Jack Sawdey's range. The moon came up as they climbed higher and higher into the Rattlesnake Hills. Its light helped them follow the sign.

The trail led to a Quarter Circle S line cabin, where the horse with the missing shoe stood slack-hipped in a tiny corral. Old Jump slid soundlessly from his saddle, putting an intent regard upon the unlighted cabin.

Jed stepped down, pulled his rifle from the boot and handed it to the oldster. "Stay out here," he said tightly, "and cover me."

He drew his sixgun and stalked forward. Stopping in the scant cover of a well-pump he called, "You in there! Come out with your hands empty—we've got a rifle on you!"

There was no answer from the shack. The only sounds were the tired hoof-stamping of the horses and the singing of crickets in the dry grass. Jed tramped on to the door of the shack and flung it open.

A lot of moonlight reached through the shack's windows. A glance told him that Lucy was not here.

But someone else was. The first warning was the intake of a man's breath, faint but purposeful, close beside the doorway. Jerking around, Jed saw the glint of moonlight on the descending barrel of a gun. Then a slashing impact jolted him, the numbing pain of it running down his

lank frame, and he knew that he was falling.

He heard a shot. But it was not from his own gun, and the sound of it ran swiftly into aching distance, beyond reach of his senses....

When he struggled back to consciousness he thought at first that he was in his own shack, lying on the bunk as he had done so often at night, listening to the rumble of thunder that had puzzled him of late. He had asked old Jump about that thunder, but Jump had made some remark about a man getting cabin fever and imagining things when he lived alone.

It wasn't night now, though. The sun streamed through the windows of the line cabin. Jed lifted his throbbing head and saw that the whole front of his shirt was stiff with dried blood.

The sound he'd heard wasn't thunder. It was the beat of approaching hoofs. Spurs jingled as the riders dismounted outside.

Jed swung his feet from the bunk and saw that his gunbelt had been taken from him and now hung on the back of a chair. He struggled to get up, and failed; and then his eyes encountered the body of the man who lay on the floor. It was Lafe Stratton, the Quarter Circle S rider who must have gunbarreled Jed last night. Stratton had been shot in the side, and had been dead for hours. Jed was gaping at the dead man when the door was flung open and Black Jack strode in with drawn gun.

"This does it, I reckon," the 'breed said. "We tracked you down, an'—Why, you kill-crazy varmint! Got Lafe too, eh?"

"If I did," Jed mumbled, "he's the first man I ever shot in my sleep. He bent a gunbarrel over my head. Take a look at my six, there—I'm betting it ain't been fired."

"You had some help here, then," Sawdey said. "No matter. You'll hang for the killin' of Eli Denn. We found him in the gully up at your place, back-shot. Tracks led from there to your shack."

Jed gripped the edge of the bunk to steady himself. He had pinned a lot of hope on Eli Denn for the clearing of old Jump Tatum on that rus-

ting charge. The hope was gone now. "You don't miss any bets, Jack," he said bitterly. "Eli could have blown your whole range-grabbing scheme sky-high if he'd talked, so you had to shut him up for keeps."

Sawdey's face darkened. "Don't try to shove your killin's off onto me! My opinion is, you're loco, cuttin' loose like you done just to help a busted-down old rustler like Tatum." He lifted his voice. "Come in an' get 'em, boys! We're makin' another trip to the Golden Lady—an' this time Rocklin won't be bustin' up the play!"

Men tramped into the shack. Jed paid no attention to them. He was looking at the dead puncher, staring woodenly at the bluish-gray mud that clung to Stratton's boots, trying to grasp the meaning of it....

THE GROUP of riders climbed the tailings dump in the warm sunshine. Jed was in the middle of it, his hands tied behind his back. Sawdey had his remaining puncher, Matt Kelley, with him. Cline Wymer was in the group, thoughtfully silent. Sam Farlew was along too, pulling often from a bottle and not at all silent.

"Gives you a final lesson," Farlew said, "about what it buys you to go helpin' cow-thieves. Soon's we string you up we'll go after Tatum."

"Sam," Wymer said irritably, "shut that mouth of yours."

The group dismounted. Kelly shook out his rope and looked up at the headrig, muttering that he'd have to climb up and make a secure tie. Sweat beaded the puncher's face. "Hell, let's get this over—"

But a grizzled head lifted into view, in the manway at one side of the shaft. Old Jump Tatum rested a sixgun on the planks of the shaft collar and shouted, "Reach 'em, boys, high as you can! Happens the sign's right for a hangin' this time, but you got the wrong man!"

In a flat silence the group faced the oldster. Wymer made a small sigh that might have been an expression of relief. Sawdey's throat muscles worked, but fury had robbed him of his voice.

"That's the ticket," Tatum crowed.

"Take it right careful—I've clumb six hundred feet on those ladders an' I'm tuckered, an' my finger's shaky on the trigger. Jed, I thought your head was busted, so I drug you to that bunk an' lit out for town, where I hired a man to ride for the doctor down in Tres Orejas. 'Fore I left that line cabin I noticed some-thin', though—blue clay on Stratton's boots! Come to me all at once, that the only place where there was clay like that was in the seam of it that we hit on the lowest level of the Golden Lady.

"When I went into the mine to see what Stratton had been doin' here I found Lucy on the first level, tied up again. What she had to say was plenty. Stratton wasn't workin' just for you, Jack—him an' Denn was takin' pay from another party. The three of 'em grabbed Lucy an' put her in the mine. Then Stratton was told to knock a shoe from his horse an' leave a plain trail that would lead you to a place where you could be killed, Jed. That went wrong, though—I got Stratton with your rifle, just after he downed you."

Black Jack snapped, "Who's this other party you're prattlin' about? Why would he—"

"Gold," old Jump said, "has bought a lot of murder in this here world. He'd had Farlew workin' in the mine on the sly, an' his dynamitin' made what Jed thought was thunder, because he was at the end of a tunnel that reaches plumb under Jed's place. Struck it in there, he did! Jed owned it, so he had to be got out of the way. I owned the mine entrance, so that wrote out my ticket. The man you want, Jack—"

There was a sudden movement in the group under the headrig. Cline Wymer's gun came almost clear of its holster—but then his body was jolted back, first by lead from Jump's gun, then by Sawdey's bullet. Wymer twisted, a look of despair on his face, and sprawled on the weathered planks.

Sam Farlew, thoroughly sober now, stretched his hands higher. "I ain't armed!" he cried. "All I done was

(please turn to page 30)

BUT ONE MAN ALONE MIGHT

by RALEY BRIEN

HIS LIPS were tight against his teeth, his chest heaved with deep breathing. He was

afraid he would sob, or that tears would stream down his cheeks. Jim Lanwell was young enough to believe that a show of emotion was a sign of weakness in a man.

He knelt on one side of the figure stretched on the walk, the doctor on the other. Some silent townsfolk looked on. Between gasps for breath, Sheriff Tom Borson whispered, "Get him for me, Jim... for me and the others...do it Jim..."

As the old lawman spoke, his face was twisted with final agony. His thin gray hair stirred on his forehead as the night breeze swept along the street. A trickle of blood came from the corner of his mouth.

"Get—" The final word was expelled on a gust of breath. The sheriff's head rolled to one side. The doctor looked across the body at Jim Lanwell, around at the others, nodded significantly, sighed, and got slowly to his feet. One of the bystanders picked up Tom Borson's hat and

placed it with gentle roughness over his face.

Jim Lanwell got up slowly also. He looked down at the body, remembering how this

Suddenly his right hand shot up and out.

man, while alive, had spoken and laughed, how less than two hours before he had heard him tell an anecdote, how he had a trick of scratching his head behind his left ear—things like that. Now he was dead, because two bullets went crashing into his breast.

As a sheriff's deputy, Jim Lanwell suddenly found a great official responsibility thrust upon him. In addition to the official burden, he had a personal duty, for Tom Borson's daughter, Ella, was Lanwell's wife.

He tried to keep emotion out of his voice as he spoke to a bystander: "Martin, please do me a favor. Have your wife get Mrs. Banley to go



He'd begin his harsh tirade, end with the wild screech and sudden gunfire—and another of the killer's promised victims would topple lifeless . . .

with her and tell Ella what's happened. I'd hurry there myself, but I have duties here."

"I'll 'tend to it, Jim." The man moved away.

Another townsman spoke: "You've plenty to do, Lanwell. Wolf Clade has killed four men—two witnesses, and the sheriff and his chief deputy. That leaves you in charge. Clade has boasted he'll kill others. You—little more'n a button—how'll you handle Clade? You wouldn't be holdin' down a deputy's job if you hadn't married the sheriff's daughter. Well, don't just stand there! What are you aimin' to do about this?"

Lanwell looked at the speaker—Ed Swall, an uncouth middle-aged man who had wanted a deputy's job and been denied. "I'm not needin' any talk from you, Swall," Lanwell said. "The sheriff said to get Clade. I'll carry out orders."

"You'll go after Wolf Clade? That's enough to make a man laugh. You ain't got guts enough to run down a chicken-stealin' coyote."

Some man yelled: "Let's get a posse together! Let's stuff our pockets with gun shells, and hit our saddles and run down that murderin' madman!"

Lanwell raised his voice. "That's not the way. Wolf Clade would spot a posse miles off. He knows this country—every hill, canyon and arroyo. I aim to go after him alone."

"When?" Ed Swall taunted.

Without replying, Lanwell turned to consult the doctor. The sheriff's body would be taken to the room behind the doctor's office, which was used as a mortuary, the young deputy was assured. The coffin-maker would do his work. Everything would be ready for the funeral the following day.

"I must go home and comfort Ella," Lanwell said.

Men stepped aside to let him pass. He strode along the plank sidewalk in front of the town's business establishments. His boot-heels thumped the boards in unbroken rhythm. Streaks of lamplight came through the windows of the saloon and revealed him as he passed. He went on into the moon-

lit night, toward his little house on the slope behind the street...

HIF HAD BEEN at home with Ella when it happened. He had been wiping dishes for her, his manner tender because the couple expected their first-born in three months or so.

They had heard two shots, wild yells, then the pounding of a horse's hoofs.

"Trouble down in the street," Ella had said.

Jim had wiped his hands on a towel quickly, and was buckling on his gunbelt when a man came running to the door.

"Shootin' scrape! You're needed, Jim!" he had called.

Lanwell had kissed Ella swiftly, and started running down the slope with the man who had come for him. "What's happened?" he had asked.

"Didn't want to tell you in front of your wife. It's the sheriff. Wolf Clade—"

That had been enough; it had explained everything to Jim Lanwell.

Five years before, Clade had been sent to prison for stock theft. Like many criminals, he had threatened to square accounts when released. That had happened before Jim Lanwell had come to town to work for the blacksmith, to meet and marry Ella Borson and become a sheriff's deputy.

Two months before, Clade had been released. He must have had stolen money hidden somewhere for he had bought a horse and gear, a couple of guns and ammunition and groceries, and had taken to the hills.

From another town, he had mailed the sheriff a letter. In it, he threatened to kill the sheriff and chief deputy, who had gathered evidence against him, two witnesses, and all the surviving members of the jury.

It had been more than a wild threat. Clade had killed the two witnesses within a week. Then he had killed the chief deputy. Now, he had killed the sheriff. And he would hunt down and kill the others if not stopped.

All the killings had followed a

pattern. Wolf Clade caught a victim off guard, and held a gun on him. "Hold your hands behind your head!" he ordered. When the victim did, knowing it would mean sudden death to refuse, Wolf Clade berated him, working up his rage until it was flaming insanity, then shot him down and rode away.

He had done so tonight, Lanwell had been told. The sheriff had been standing in the streak of light coming from a store doorway, talking to friends. A rider had come down the street to turn in toward the hitch rail.

He had not been recognized at first. The lawman and his friends were laughing at something happening in the store. A harsh voice had called: "Sheriff! Get 'em up! Hands behind your head!"

Tom Borson had been caught unarmed, for he'd left his gunbelt in his office when he strolled to the store to get smoking tobacco. He had no chance of defense. The townsmen to whom he was talking stood stricken motionless. The outlaw began his tirade, ended with a wild screech and sudden gunfire. Then hoofs drummed the earth as Wolf Clade rode away through the moonlight...

JIM LANWELL was remembering this as he went toward home. Now he had to go to Ella, who'd loved her father dearly. After the funeral, he would attend to his official duty, run down Clade and get him, either dead or alive.

He knew others would watch him closely, question his courage and ability. And Wolf Clade was ruthless, a beast in human form, with a wild beast's cunning. The fact that Lanwell had not been there to aid in Clade's arrest and conviction would carry no weight with the outlaw. The badge he wore would give Clade incentive enough.

From a patch of darkness, a man stepped into the path in front of Lanwell. "Senor!" he called softly. "I am Pedro Perez."

Lanwell's right hand remained on his holster, where he had dropped it. "What do you want, Pedro? Walk

toward me through the moonlight."

Lanwell knew the middle-aged Mexican, who did odd jobs around town, for a hard-working respected man with a large family. Perez shuffled forward, stopped and spoke:

"I know what has happened, Senor Lanwell. The sheriff was a good man who often helped me. I believe, senor, I can show you how to get Wolf Clade."

"You know where he hides out?" Lanwell asked, eagerly.

"Not that, senor. But I know how perhaps you can handle him if he attacks you. I have heard how he sneaks upon a man and gets the drop on him, tells him to clasp his hands behind his head, then shoots him while he is helpless. Such a man can be handled, if you know how."

"Why are you so eager to help anyone get Wolf Clade?" Lanwell asked.

Perez drooped his head, and scratched at the sandy soil with the toe of a ragged sandal. "My first child was a daughter. A year before Wolf Clade was arrested and sent to prison, he stopped at my hut on a ranch where I was working. He demanded food, and my wife fed him. He saw my daughter, who was sixteen and beautiful. When he rode away, he took her with him, though she kicked and screamed and my wife tried to fight him. We have not seen her since. Do you understand, senor?"

"I understand," Lanwell said. "How can you help me?"

"At the mouth of Mad Dog Canyon is a path branching off to the right. Day after tomorrow, meet me there a little after daylight. It is better nobody else knows."

"I'll meet you there," Acting Sheriff Lanwell decided.

Perez bowed and stepped aside, and Lanwell strode on up the path toward his home.

The sheriff was buried late the following afternoon. Before the funeral, Lanwell wrote a report of the sheriff's murder and mailed it to the state capital, and swore in an elderly townsman to act as his office deputy. After the funeral, he tried to comfort Ella.

"I'll be up before daybreak," he told her that evening. "You sleep late, honey."

"Where are you going? What are you going to do?" She showed alarm.

"Have to meet a man. You bear up, Ella."

He met Perez at the appointed place, and followed him along a narrow trail which ran into a rocky gorge.

"We dismount here, senor," Perez said, finally....

THREE HOURS later, Lanwell loped back to town alone. He stopped at the house to eat, then hurried to the sheriff's office.

"There's been a committee lookin' for you, Jim," the new office deputy reported. "Ed Swall and some of his cronies."

"What'd they want?"

"Swall has been proddin' folks to rile you. Sayin' you should go right after Wolf Clade, and hintin' maybe you're feared to do it. Says he should be named sheriff. He sent off a letter to the state capital 'bout it."

"Until I hear different from the capital, I'm actin' sheriff. Tell 'em that, if they come pesterin' around here again," Lanwell instructed.

The office deputy's voice lowered: "They're comin' down the street now, with Ed Swall at their head."

Lanwell unbuckled his gunbelt and put it on the desk. He went to the open door and stood in it, leaning against the casement, calmly building a cigarette.

Swall and his half dozen close friends stopped in front of him as Lanwell thumbed a match and lit his smoke.

"Where've you been?" Swall demanded.

"Tendin' to official business, which is no business of yours."

"Prob'ly hidin' so you can dodge that official business. We want action, Lanwell, and we're demandin' it. A wild killer ridin' the hills, and you standin' here propped up in your office doorway!"

"I'm comfortable this way," Lanwell remarked.

"You've got to swear in a posse and go into the hills for Wolf Clade!

I'll round up some good men."

"No posse! Ride if you feel like it, but you won't be sworn in. You'll be citizens, not officers, and if you meet up with Clade and kill him you can be tried for murder."

"What are you tryin' to do, protect Clade?" Swall raged. "A fine way for a deputy sheriff to talk!"

"I'm settin' you right by tellin' you the law. A posse can't do the work. One man alone might. I'm handlin' this alone."

"When?" Swall taunted.

"When I'm ready. Maybe five or six days from now."

"Why wait five or six days? What'll you be doin' all that time?" Swall asked.

"Maybe searchin' for trail, and maybe waitin' for some information from certain sources."

"You're stallin'," Swall accused. "You'd be scared to take Clade's trail if you found it."

"Are you meanin' to call me a coward?" Lanwell asked, his voice low and quiet and almost expressionless.

"I am, and you'd better resign your job 'fore you're kicked out of it in disgrace."

Lanwell took a deep drag on his cigarette, dropped it, crushed it with the sole of his foot. He went forward slowly as Swall's friends stepped aside. Swall set himself in a crouch. Lanwell rushed suddenly, his fists coming up.

Swall bored in with a display of wild rage and brute force. Lanwell sidestepped and rocked Swall's head. By clever footwork, he avoided Swall's rushes, occasionally got in a punishing blow, led Swall into continuing the wild rushes which soon tired him. Finally, Lanwell started battering his foe, driving him back, at the finish sending him down into the dust to sprawl in semiconsciousness.

Breathing heavily, Lanwell reeled aside, picked his hat up off the ground, knocked dust from it and put it upon his head.

"Carry him to the blacksmith's water trough and douse his head," he told Swall's friends. He leaned

against the door casement again, fumbled tobacco sack and papers from a shirt pocket, and began building a fresh cigarette.

FOR FOUR mornings, Lanwell rode away from home before daylight and returned about noon. He told nobody where he went or what he did, not even Ella. On the fifth morning, after he had spent a couple of hours with Perez in the gulch near the mouth of Mad Dog Canyon, Perez said:

"I have done all I can for you, senior."

"Thanks, Perez. I 'can't wait any longer. Now, I'm goin' after Wolf Clade."

"I ask one thing, senior. If it is possible bring in Clade alive. I would like to look upon his dead body—*si!* But I would rather see him strangling at the end of a rope."

"I'll get him alive if I can," Lanwell promised.

Lanwell loped back home. Ella watched him as he ate. When he had finished, he said, "I'm startin' to trail Wolf Clade tomorrow, Ella."

"With a posse, Jim?"

"I'm trailin' alone."

"Jim! He got Dad...and there's the baby coming...and if you—"

"Ella! Your Dad taught you all about sheriffin'. You bein' the daughter of a sheriff, and the wife of a deputy—well, it's like bein' the daughter and wife of army officers, I s'pose—somethin' like that."

"I know, Jim. You've got your duty. But be careful. If you'd take only two or three men—"

"I've got to go alone. We'll talk more about it this evenin' after supper. I've got to go to the office now."

He found most of the townsmen gathered around the sheriff's office and the jail. As Lanwell approached, Ed Swall advanced to meet him.

"Seems like you ain't trusted much by your superiors, Lanwell," Swall said. "There's a deputy United States Marshal waitin' in your office to see you."

"Be glad to meet him," Lanwell said, without stopping.

"Maybe he's been sent here to handle things. 'Bout time somebody did somethin'."

Lanwell entered the office and closed the door. The marshal was a middle-aged man huge in body, his face bronzed by sun and weather.

"I was driftin' in this direction, and was asked to look in on you, Lanwell," the marshal said. "The authorities are some riled by Wolf Clade and his doin's."

"Are you takin' over?" Lanwell asked.

"Don't get steamed up. Just thought I might give you some advice, if you happen to need any."

"I've been makin' plans," Lanwell said. "Just completed them, and aim to start after Clade in the mornin'. I'm goin' after him alone. Folks here are yellin' for a posse, but that'd be useless."

"Waste of horseflesh and men's time," the marshal agreed. "What else? You've made plans, you said."

"I'll tell them to you alone." He looked at the office deputy. "You go out and tell Swall and his friends what I said—that I'm startin' after Clade in the mornin'."

THE OFFICE deputy went out. Through the window, Lanwell watched men crowd around him. He sat at the desk across from the marshal and began talking in low tones.

The marshal looked skeptical at first. Then his eyes gleamed, and he bent forward with his elbows on the desk and revealed enthusiastic interest. When Lanwell had finished talking, the marshal said:

"I like it! I believe you can work it. But you're runnin' a good chance of stoppin' gun slugs."

"Any man who wears a law badge takes that chance in this part of the country."

"Where are you goin' to start—and how?" the marshal asked.

"I know that after he shot the sheriff, Clade rode through Mad Dog Canyon, so he's prob'ly got a hideaway in the hills on the other side of the range. All I can do is ride into the canyon and keep goin', not tryin' to hide my whereabouts. I don't know how to get to him, so

maybe he'll get to me."

"Sound reasonin'," the marshal complimented.

"I want to slip away before day-break, and I don't want a lot of men followin' me."

"I'll see they don't. If they try it, I'll send 'em on a false trail."

"Thanks," Lanwell said. "Give me two days. If I'm not back by then, pick a couple of men and follow me and gather up what's left. If I get Wolf Clade, either dead or alive, I'll bring him in on his own horse."

The marshal got out of his chair and stretched. "Let's step outside, Lanwell, and I'll do a mite of talkin' to the local gents."

Lanwell opened the office door, and the marshal went out first. As the townsmen gathered, Lanwell leaned against the door casement in his familiar pose.

"Gentlemen," the marshal told the townsmen, "I've had a talk with Deputy Jim Lanwell. He's made plans, of which I approve. He's startin' after Wolf Clade in the mornin', and he's travelin' alone."

Ed Swall yelled, "Are you crazy, Marshal? Clade will murder him if they meet. I'd make up a big posse and ride the hills and smoke Clade outen his hole."

"That's enough!" the marshal barked. "You're not handlin' this. And don't mix in. If you interfere with Lanwell in any way, I'll arrest you. That's all."

AN HOUR before daylight the following morning, Lanwell left the house and took the trail. There had been a tearful parting with Ella.

He had cleaned, oiled and loaded his pet gun, and filled his cartridge belt with shells. He had donned old trail clothes, and taken a bundle of thick meat sandwiches she had made, and put them into a saddlebag. Then he went outside and quickly saddled his pony.

In the streak of lamplight which streamed through the doorway to penetrate the blackness just before dawn, Ella watched him. When he was ready, she went forward, holding out her arms. He clasped her, bent and kissed her.

"I'm hopin' everything will be all right," he said. "Try not to worry too much."

Then he swung up into his saddle and rode without turning his head to look back.

The eastern horizon was pinkish when Lanwell reached the mouth of Mad Dog Canyon, where he usually met Pedro Perez. He stopped his pony as the Mexican came from behind a mass of rocks.

"Nobody has passed, senior," Perez reported. "Neither traveling from the town or toward it. During the night, I went to the top of the canyon wall. In the distance, I saw a tiny flicker I knew came from a fire."

"Good enough! Will you wait for me here?"

"For two days, but no longer. If you do not return in that time, I'll trail you. Are you prepared, senior?"

"As much as I'll ever be," Lanwell replied.

"I shall pray for you, senior. Go with God!"

Lanwell gathered up his reins, touched lightly with his spurs, and rode on.

Before he had traveled a mile, the high rocky walls of the canyon frowned down upon him. He stopped at a wayside spring to let the pony drink. Removing his coat, he rolled it and tied it behind the cantle, for he knew that when the rising sun struck the canyon wall it would grow hot.

In the saddle again, Lanwell settled himself, adjusted his holster, and rode on. After covering a couple of miles, he rested his pony in a spot of shade, then went on leisurely. He had no definite destination, no urge to make speed. He was there to show himself, in the hope Wolf Clade would see him and make contact. He was riding to a strange duel where the advantage would be against him.

THE CANYON broadened an hour before sunset, and the shadows lengthened. One thought chilled him. Suppose Wolf Clade had changed his method. What if he merely fired from ambush to make a quick end of it, instead of facing his victim and

berating him before shooting him down?

Where a tiny spring gushed from a ledge, with a small amount of green grass around it, Lanwell stopped his pony. He had decided to camp for the night, though it was yet early, for he might not find sweet water and grass farther on.

Before he dismounted, he scanned the walls of the canyon, eyed the shadows, listened to sounds. He got to the ground, unsaddled and picketed his pony, took a pan and a small package of tea from a saddlebag, filled the pan with water at the spring, and began gathering small dry sticks and bits of heavier fuel to make a fire. Hot tea and cold thick meat sandwiches would be his supper.

He was kneeling, banking the twigs and sticks against a rock when he heard the harsh threatening voice:

"Get your hands up! Reach for your gun, and you're a dead man! On your feet!"

Lanwell shivered at sound of the voice. He raised his hands, got to his feet and turned. A man had emerged from behind a huge rock within fifteen feet of him, and stood with his feet planted far apart and his body bent forward slightly, menacing with a gun.

Lanwell never had seen Wolf Clade, and the description of the outlaw would have fitted a hundred men in the district. This man's clothing was foul with dried mud. Black whiskers streaked with gray covered his cheeks and chin. Long matted black hair fell about his neck.

"Who are you?" Lanwell asked. "You aimin' to rob me?"

"I'm Wolf Clade. You've heard of me plenty. And I know you. You're Jim Lanwell, deputy sheriff."

"That's right."

"I've heard rumors you were comin' to take me. You had no hand in sendin' me to prison, wasn't around here at the time. I didn't have any intention of puttin' your name on my list and killin' you. But since you've come after me, that's changed."

"I s'pose so," Lanwell said.

"Get your hands behind your head, and clasp 'em!"

Slowly, Lanwell obeyed. This was

the perilous moment. If Wolf Clade kept to his pattern, he would commence a tirade now, work himself into a killing rage, then shoot. Lanwell had flashing confused thoughts—about death, the sheriff, Ella and the expected child...

He spoke again, quickly: "If you aim to kill me, Clade, I'd like to tell you somethin' first. Since I had no hand in sendin' you to prison, maybe I'm entitled to that much."

"Do your talkin'."

Lanwell faced him squarely. They were not more than twelve feet apart now. Lanwell held his body erect and his head high, and spoke with some vehemence. As he talked, his eyes held those of the outlaw. His fingers came unclasped behind his head, and strayed downward to the loose neck of his shirt. They moved slowly as he talked, half an inch at a time, without his elbows and forearms moving the slightest.

"When I came after you, Clade, I only did my duty," Lanwell said. "You'd killed the sheriff and his chief deputy, and there was no other lawman left to come. What else could I do? The others wanted me to bring a posse, and I refused. Didn't see any sense in lettin' you shoot half a dozen men from ambush maybe..."

The fingers of his right hand finally touched and clasped what he sought in his cautious groping—the hilt of a throwing knife cleverly encased in a sheath fastened to his shirt between his shoulder blades.

And suddenly his right hand shot up and out, and the streaks of sunset glinted from steel. Lanwell dropped to one knee as the knife left his hand, and the hand flashed downward to his holster.

The knife struck true. Under stress, Lanwell had done what Pedro Perez had taught him to do. The blade entered Wolf Clade's right side. Clade squeezed trigger before the gun dropped from his hand, but the slug went wild.

Lanwell hurled himself forward, his own weapon held up, until it slashed down repeatedly. As he pistol-whipped the mad killer into unconsciousness, he thought again of the

(please turn to page 62)

BUSHWHACKER'S BRIDE

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

OLD HABIT woke John Morgan at sunup. He lay staring at the scarlet light which came through the lace curtain covering the that slowly shifted position on the west wall as the sun rose higher. Sally Daren had wanted to lower the shade so the light wouldn't waken him, but he hadn't let her. When a

tired than usual. He wondered if this was the day when he couldn't get out to the rocking chair on the front porch. He wasn't fooling himself. That day was coming soon, and when it did, he was finished. He hoped the end would come quickly, for he had never been a patient man, and it would be more than he could stand

**THE WILDTOWNS HAD
SPAWNED THIS
SHE DEVIL....
OFF-TRAIL
THRILLER!**



He heard Sally scream, "No Marty, no." Then he felt the numb empty feeling through his body.

man got to his place in life, he should wake up early. The long sleep was only a few weeks ahead.

Morgan had been tired for months, but this morning he seemed more

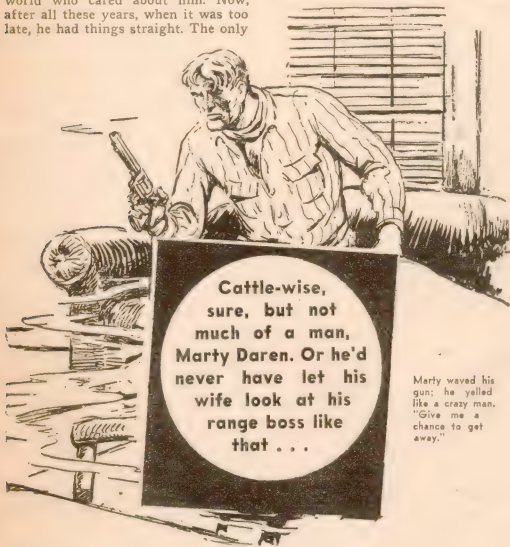
to lie here and be waited on hand and foot by Sally.

He heard the men outside by the corrals; he could hear Sally working in the kitchen. She was fixing his

breakfast. She knew he wouldn't be able to eat it except maybe drink a cup of coffee, but she had to try and he had to toy with the egg and bacon, a pretense that didn't fool her at all. She didn't fool him, either. She was close to crying every time she took the tray, a fact that gave him deep satisfaction.

She was the one person in the world who cared about him. Now, after all these years, when it was too late, he had things straight. The only

and think. In fact, he'd always been contemptuous of the thinkers, men like the preacher and Doc Sanders and the teacher in Shavano. He'd been a do-er. He'd been sixteen when his folks had died and he'd gone to work to support his younger brother and sister. Then, after they'd grown up, he'd set out to make his ranch an empire and he'd succeeded. A thinker



Marty waved his gun; he yelled like a crazy man. "Give me a chance to get away."

thing that mattered was a woman's love; it was the only thing that gave a man any real contentment. He had accomplished everything in his fifty-two years that he'd set out to do, but he did have one regret. If he had met a woman like Sally a long time ago, a lot of things would have been different.

He'd never had any time to just sit

wouldn't have done that.

Outside, Marty Daren was giving the orders for the day. Marty wasn't much good in some ways, and if it hadn't been for Sally, Morgan wouldn't have made him foreman three years ago. He knew cattle and he knew the cattle business, and the ranch had prospered, even when Morgan had gone East to the clinics and

had come home to die.

No, Morgan had no kick about Marty's work. But by Morgan's standards he wasn't much of a man. Too moody, too sullen when things went wrong—and much much too patient, or he'd have divorced Sally. Morgan had asked her to divorce Marty and marry him, but Sally said she couldn't go through that, so he'd been satisfied just to have her around. Besides, it was Marty who had grounds for divorce, not Sally.

He heard the men ride out, probably headed for Three Pines Mesa. They'd be shipping in a couple of weeks, Sally had told him the day before. Marty never told him anything now and it was just as well. Marty hated him, a hatred that had been steadily growing for three years. Well, Morgan couldn't blame him. If it had been the other way around, Morgan would have killed Marty, but Marty had a good thing, so he'd put up with it.

Sally was still working in the kitchen. She'd be in any time, now that Marty had gone with the crew. Morgan closed his eyes. Funny at a time like this how a man got to thinking about the hereafter. It was too late for that just as it was too late for a lot of things.

THE PREACHER had come out a couple of weeks before to talk about Morgan's immortal soul, and Morgan told him plain out how he felt.

"I've been a heller all my life," Morgan said. "I've been mean and ornery, have always taken what I wanted because I was the kind of man who could get what he wanted. Now what's the Lord going to do about me?"

"The Lord's forgiveness is beyond human understanding," the preacher said.

"I don't give a damn about the Lord," Morgan snapped. "I know what I'd do if I was Him and some huckleberry who'd lived like me got religion on his death bed—I'd shove him right down into purgatory so fast it would make his head swim."

The preacher was shocked. "That's

sacrilege. No man has any right to compare himself to the Lord."

"All right, all right. I've lived my life the way I've wanted to and I'll die on my record."

Morgan didn't want to talk about it. He had been thinking on this business ever since the clinic doctors had put him through all those tests, punched and gouged him from hell to breakfast, taken a lot of pictures, and then told him how it was. It was scary, thinking about the hereafter, but he'd known men who'd had their fun and made a death-bed confession. Not John Morgan. It was too late for him.

But the preacher hadn't been willing to let it drop there. He cleared his throat and Morgan could see the sly look on him like a banker when he makes a man a loan, knowing all the time he'll close the fellow out the minute his luck goes sour and he can't pay.

"You'll be leaving a big estate," the preacher said. "Perhaps you've made a will, but you could change it. You see, we have a mortgage on our church building in Shavano, and I thought it would be a fine thing if you'd leave us a gift, to pay..."

"And buy myself a piece of Heaven? The devil with you. Get out."

Morgan had had more strength then than now. He'd grabbed up a bronze paperweight off his bed stand and thrown it at the preacher's head. Didn't miss by more than an inch, and the preacher decided it was the proper moment to leave.

The preacher had given Morgan something else to think about, though—a will. But he kept putting it off because he had never found anything he couldn't lick, and he kept thinking he was going to lick this thing and make liars out of every sawbones who'd looked at him.

When a man got down to making a will he admitted he was whipped. But he'd gone downhill every day of these two weeks, so yesterday he got to the phone long enough to call up his lawyer in town. Sally would have had a fit, but she'd been out hanging up a

washing. She never knew he left his rocking chair where he was supposed to stay.

He heard her cross the living room; she opened the door and came in. Even now, tired and sick as he was, Morgan felt good just looking at Sally. She was too good for Marty, but she was just right for Morgan.

SALLY WAS always clean and bright and vibrant. She was twenty-four, black-eyed and black-haired, with a good sense of humor and a laugh that was a pleasure to hear. She had a fine figure with her round breasts, and hips that were not too wide, and trim ankles.

Morgan could think of a lot of things he admired in Sally. The way she lifted herself above the trashy family of drifters she came from. The way she stuck with Marty when they were starving to death on his greasy-sack spread over on Cedar Creek. The proud way she carried her head as if she'd been born a queen. And now that he was this way, she never by so much as a word or facial expression showed that she regretted anything. A woman would have to love a man plenty to put up with what she had.

She brought a pan of water, and a towel was thrown over her shoulder. She said, "Good morning, John. How did you sleep?"

"Fine," he lied. "How are you?"

She gave him her warm smile. He liked her white teeth that seemed whiter than they were because her lips were so red. Something began to swell in Morgan. She belonged to him, not to Marty Daren.

He reached out and touched her arm when she sat down on the bed, filled with the pride of possession.

"I'm fine, too, John," she said. "Why shouldn't I be?"

He didn't answer. There were plenty of reasons why she shouldn't be fine, but she didn't complain. She never complained. It was another thing he liked about her. He wondered what she would do when he was gone, but he put the ques-

tion out of his mind, wanting nothing to mar the enjoyment which her presence gave him.

She washed his face, white and so thin that his cheekbones seemed about to break through his skin. She dried his face and washed his hands, just skin and big knuckles and bone, hands that had done so many things and now were good for nothing.

She flung the towel over her shoulder and would have got up if he hadn't reached out and gripped her hand. For a moment their eyes met and he sensed they were thinking of the same thing, the afternoons they had spent together when Marty had been out on the range.

"I've got a surprise for you," he said. "It'll come later this morning."

She looked away quickly, struggling with her emotions. He had given her many things. She kept most of them in the ranch house instead of the cabin where she stayed with Marty. Morgan understood. It was natural enough for Marty to be jealous and furious because he couldn't buy her the expensive things that Morgan could.

"You shouldn't," she said. "You pay us awfully well, John. I mean, now..."

Her voice trailed off. He knew what she meant. It would never again be the way it had been three years ago when she and Marty had come here. He wasn't a man now, just an empty body waiting to die.

"I should," he said, "because I want to. You understand that, don't you? Anything I do is a small thing after all you've done for me."

She drew her hand from his and stood up. "I'll bring your breakfast."

"Let's not keep on playing a foolish game," he said. "Just the coffee."

She hesitated, obviously not wanting to admit that he would never eat a real meal again. Then she smiled and nodded. "All right, John."

SHE LEFT the room, Morgan's eyes on her until she disappeared. He thought how it had started, that day in Shavano when he had

seen her for the first time. No woman had ever struck him like that. He'd found out who she was and that she and her husband had moved onto the Triangle R. It was hardscrabble range, the kind of spread that only a poor man would tackle. Two men had failed, and Marty Daren was beaten before he started.

Morgan had waited until even Marty, stupidly stubborn as he was, knew he was licked. Then Morgan had gone over there and offered Marty the foreman's job.

"I can use both of you," he'd said. "Your wife can keep an eye on the big house for me."

He remembered how it had been, both of them standing in front of the tar paper shack, both hungry, with the defeated look in their eyes of people who had done all they could and found out it hadn't been enough. He'd offered good pay, and they'd jumped at it, not questioning what was in his mind, for good jobs were hard to get.

He hadn't liked Marty from the first, but Sally had made up for Marty's deficiencies. Morgan had been careful with her for a few weeks, uncertain how she would feel. She soon let him know she liked him, not in words but in the subtle ways a woman has. After that he'd seen to it that Marty was busy miles from the house, or he'd sent him to Denver to buy a bull or machinery or to see a buyer.

Morgan knew there was talk. He didn't care. He'd always lived his life the way he wanted to and this was no time to change. If it bothered Sally, she never indicated it. That was another thing he liked about her. She didn't answer to anyone, not even to Marty.

Morgan was never sure when Marty found out or how he heard. Perhaps it was just natural suspicion. In any case he didn't say a word. Morgan would never have known Marty knew if he hadn't sensed a growing hostility in the man.

Sally came in with his coffee and propped his head up with the pillows. She sat on the edge of the bed, cheerful and composed. He held her hand again, cool and soft, and let himself think of how it had been between

them. Even now, with all that behind him, he found satisfaction in the memory.

When he finished the coffee, Sally rose. "I think you ought to stay in bed today, John."

"This isn't the day," he said. "When it comes, I'll never get back on the porch. I'll just rot here in bed."

She opened her mouth and closed it. She never argued with him about anything, but he saw the shadow of worry that was on her face. She turned, and then swung back.

"John, Marty was drunk last night," she said. "He's in a mean mood. I wish you'd stay inside."

He knew then. It had finally reached the breaking point. Kind of funny, coming now, with Morgan sick and Sally nothing more than a nurse. But it was like Marty. Not much of a man. If he were, he'd have done something a long time ago.

"Don't worry about it," Morgan said. "Let him quit. I've got other men who can run this outfit as good as Marty can."

"It isn't that, John," she said in a low tone. "He won't quit. I'm afraid he'll do something to you."

"Not Marty," he said.

SHE LEFT the room then. It amused him to think of Marty doing anything. A man who'd taken what Marty had and stood it for three years wasn't going to do anything now. But Sally's concern pleased him. She loved him enough to worry about these last few weeks of life.

He got his feet on the floor and stood up, a hand on the head of the bed. Damn it, why should his legs want to buckle under him like this? He'd never thought he'd come to this place. He forced himself to reach for his robe and got it on, and then he had to sit down again.

Tired, so tired he doubted that he could get to the porch. But he did, holding to the backs of chairs and gripping the door jambs, and then he dropped into the rocking chair, sweat breaking through his skin. Three years ago he wouldn't have been this tired after he'd been in the saddle from sunup to sundown,

or after he'd branded calves all day.

He put his head against the back of the chair, not having enough energy to rock. It was good just to sit here and look out across the grass with the morning sun upon it. Enough to make a man proud. He'd done it himself, and that was the only thing a man had a right to be proud of. He regretted that he didn't have a son to leave his property to. If he had met Sally before she'd married Marty, or if she'd divorced Marty and married him, he'd have that son now. *Too late.* Those two words had been in his mind a lot lately.

He didn't see Marty come out of the bunkhouse until the man was within twenty feet of the porch. He caught two things about Marty in that first glance: the gun in his hand, and the wild, animal-like meanness that marked his set face. He thought, *this is like Marty. It would take him three years to work up enough guts to do anything.*

For a moment he was afraid, the first time he'd been afraid for years. He remembered, so long ago it had been forgotten, back before he had been an important man. He'd come close to getting his neck stretched when he'd been caught with a running iron. He couldn't even remember how he'd got out of it.

He watched Marty come toward him, moving stiff-legged like a man hypnotized, and then he wasn't afraid. This was a good, quick way to go. If Marty had any sense, he'd let life go on through the last agonizing weeks, but Marty didn't have any sense.

He heard Sally scream, "No, Marty, no." He felt her hand on his shoulder; he heard the thunder of the gun and it seemed to him he was falling, but he had no place to fall. There wasn't any pain, just the numb, empty feeling that spread through

his body like a sort of paralysis.

For a moment he thought Marty was going to shoot Sally, too. But he didn't. He waved his gun; he yelled like a crazy man, "You've wanted his money. All right, you can have it and him, too. And don't call the sheriff. Give me a chance to get away."

Marty wheeled and ran, scurrying like a panicky rabbit. He had left his saddled horse on the other side of the bunkhouse. He swung up and put his horse into a run.

"Sally." Morgan knew her hand was still on his shoulder, but he couldn't see her. He was glad. He didn't want to see her cry. "I wanted to give...you..."

His head dropped sideways. The drum of Marty's hoofbeats faded. No sound then, no sound at all until the telephone in the front room began to ring. Sally walked to it, empty inside, drained dry of all emotion. She took the receiver down from the hook; said, "Hello."

"Hello. Sally?"

"Yes." She knew the voice—Morgan's lawyer in Shavano.

"Just called to let you know that I have the will drawn up. I'll be out in half an hour. All it needs is John's signature."

"What will?"

"John's will. He called me yesterday and told me to go ahead with it. He's leaving everything to you. Didn't he tell you?"

"John's dead," she cried, and hung up.

She began to weep; she beat at the telephone until her hands were bloody. She screamed, "Three years of playing up to that old fool, wasted. Damn Marty, oh damn him. Just half an hour and he couldn't wait..."

The hysteria passed. She wiped her eyes with the hem of her apron. Suddenly vindictive, she rang for the sheriff in Shavano.... ● END



TOMBSTONE STORY

by LAURAN PAINE

LIFE IN the early West was cheap and held in light regard, but it can safely be doubted if anyone was ever killed over a more preposterous trifle than a plaid shirt. If such casual mayhem were possible today, when it's considered fashionable to wear those baggy creations inspired by the motion picture industry, that hang outside a man's pants and are splattered with every color in the rainbow—the nation's sidewalks would be depopulated overnight.

Anyway, Tom Waters of Tombstone was shot to death because he wore a cotton shirt of big, black and white checks—and, in a way, he had it coming.

Tom had gone to Tombstone after having a little min-

Tom Waters was a pleasant enough fellow, with all his massive bulk and tasty eye. He was just under forty years of age and was quickly dubbed a "sport." This designation wasn't only hung on him because of

his love of liquor and cards, however, for Tom liked to dress too. His sartorial splendor was a standing joke among the cowboys, miners, and freighters who frequented Tombstone's "better houses."

Ed Bradshaw was a direct antithesis of his pardner. He was small, wizened and quiet, with no great love for gambling or drinking, although he enjoyed both in moderation. Ed was around fifty, or a little over, at the time big Tom Waters came to live with him, Ed was respected and liked around

Tom Waters was wearing this black and white checkered shirt.



Yes, Tom Waters of Tombstone was shot to death for no better reason than that he wore a cotton shirt of big, black and white checks

ing luck up in Colorado. He was a big, handsome man, powerfully built and clear eyed. He was new to Arizona Territory and, after arriving, looked up an old friend named Ed Bradshaw, who had a cabin on the outskirts of town. Naturally, Bradshaw asked Waters to move in with him, since there was ample room for both. This Tom did with alacrity, sallying forth frequently to try his luck at the gambling tables and sample the liquid lightning of the local saloons.

Tombstone. He was a hard worker and a good miner.

Ed knew Tom better than anyone else in Tombstone, naturally, and passed the word that, while Tom was an excellent fellow sober, drunk he was hell on wheels and it was wise to avoid him then. Tombstone's denizens duly filed that little gem of understatement away and sedulously kept away from Tom when he had been drinking. Of course, there were strangers who didn't know about

Tom's Jekyll-Hyde disposition, and some lively tussles ensued, which Tom, with his two hundred pounds of bone and muscle, invariably won.

Then the day came when Tom, having won a wad of money at the games in Corrigan's Saloon, ambled down to the general store and bought himself a black and white checkered shirt. Actually, the "black" squares were a very dark navy blue, but their shade really wasn't important since, before the day was over, the shirt was a solid, slimy red.

Tom liked the incredible garment so well that he promptly took off his old shirt, then and there, to the consternation of the clerks and the blushing indignation of the ladies, and donned the new one, swelling his massive chest in pride. With an expansive smile Tom paid for his new toga, consigned the old one to the fireless stove, and stalked back down through town like an animated checkerboard.

Tombstone had come to know Tom well enough, it thought, and hailed him with a lot of droll banter, but this apparently didn't ruffle the big sport and he'd josh right back. The day wore on pleasantly enough, with big Tom back at Corrigan's bar, taking his ribbing in a good-natured way and leisurely drinking up a little of his recent winnings. He refused to join in any more games for a while, feeling the urge for liquid relaxation.

He had been drinking for about an hour, intermittently, and the majority of the saloon's patrons had made their jokes about the shirt and shut up. However, every once in a while a newcomer would stroll in, squint under the dazzling impact of the black and white checks and, roaring with laughter, made some remark.

AFTER A while, though, Tom found that the jokes, invariably the same, became a little monotonous. Then too, he had consumed quite a neat little amount of "Taos Lightnin'." Instead of going home prudently, big Tom finally turned away from the bar and glared at

the most recent patron of Corrigan's to remark on his attire.

"If there's somebody in here who don't like my shirt," he boomed, "let the lousy son stand up an' I'll break his back with my hands!"—A feat quite possible to the massive Tom.

Naturally, no one stood up, feeling the indispensibility of a sound backbone, if for no other purpose, to assist in holding the body erect while leaning against the bar or sitting at a poker table. Besides, the shirt didn't matter that much.

Tom turned back to the bar and had a few more drinks. Needless to state, he was left strictly alone and had ample elbow room on both sides of his section of the bar.

For some little time there seemed to be no imminent disaster and even big Tom's wild eye was mellowing a little, when his pardner stepped through the swinging doors, and, seeing Tom and the spectacular shirt, grinned widely at his friend and spoke in a joking away about it. Without any warning at all, Tom struck out with all he had. Ed Bradshaw collapsed in a heap, blood cascading freely from a bad gash over his eye. Swearing violently, Tom Waters stepped over the unconscious form of his pardner and stalked out of the saloon, a trifle unsteadily, and crossed the road to Vogan & Flynn's Saloon, where he stood wide eyed and spraddle legged in the doorway and roared:

"Is they a dirty son in here as don't like my shirt?"

Startled, to say the least, but wise in the ways of the frontier, the patrons of Vogan's & Flynn's place gravely shook their heads in silence and kept a wary eye on the infuriated hulk in the doorway, hoping it would go away. Tom eyed the silent customers for a long, baleful second, found he had nothing but inarticulate admirers there, spun on his heel and was stalking back through the doorway when a cowboy by the name of Ferris, whom he knew, smiled up at him, en route to the interior of the saloon, eyed the shirt, and quipped.

Tom lowered his head and rolled

his weight behind the thunderous blow he blasted at Ferris, and the unfortunate fellow cleared the plank sidewalk to come to rest several feet out in the dust of the roadway. Tom, by then roaring a challenge to the whole West, stepped over Ferris' body and re-crossed the road and barged wildly back into Corrigan's.

By the time Tom Waters got back to Corrigan's Saloon, the place held only a sprinkling of customers and a couple of sweating bartenders. There was a scarlet pool of blood where Ed Bradshaw had been, but, after Tom had stalked out of the place, Ed had come around, gone in the back room, washed out the ragged tear in his forehead and silently left the place white faced and erect.

Tom sullenly leaned on the bar and demanded a drink, which was immediately set up. If he missed Ed he gave no sign of it.

Ed, meanwhile, had gone down to his cabin, doctored the purplish gash as best he could, pasted a clean rag over it, put his sixgun into his waistband and methodically walked back up through town, taking his place on the sidewalk directly opposite Corrigan's Saloon. It wasn't long before the swinging doors of Corrigan's place disclosed that plaid shirt bent over the bar. Ed, confident of his prey, crossed the road and waited. Sometime later big Tom strolled truculently out of Corrigan's

and came face to face with his partner. He stopped and looked closely at Ed, who was leaning casually against the front wall of the saloon.

"Why'd ya hit me?"

Ed's words were silky soft and his eyes cold and blank. No one was close enough to hear Tom's reply, but the tone of his voice was insultingly angry. He took a step as though to pass Ed, when the latter yanked the sixgun out of his waistband and fired four quick, thunderous shots.

Big Tom staggered at the first shot and turned back toward Ed with a murderous leer on his face. At the second shot he wavered slightly and collapsed, after which Ed Bradshaw pumped two more slugs into him, then calmly put his pistol away again.

The first shot had struck Tom Waters under the arm and ranged inward and downward, the next two hit him in the back, and the final shot plowed directly through the top of his head and passed almost into his abdomen. He was dead, apparently, before the last shot was fired; at any rate, any one of the shots would have cashed him in.

Bradshaw was arrested as soon as the law was certain that he was not going to employ the last bullet or two in his gun making a getaway, and was duly tried and convicted of murder, although his sentence was, in view of the "known circumstances," very lenient. ●END

TIME FOR A HANGIN'

(cont'd from page 14)

the diggin'—Wymer killed Denn himself, sayin' it had to be done before Eli was made to tell how he'd range-butchered that Quarter Circle S critter an' sold the beef an' buried the hide."

Black Jack holstered his gun, wiped sweat from his broad face, and turned to Jed. "I been some shakes of a fool," he muttered. "He was usin' me to get rid of you an' old Jump. Hell, I'll see to it that you get that beef contract back, an' that your buyer accepts late delivery. It's the least

I can do..."

Jump Tatum clambered out of the manway and Lucy followed him, her face pale and anxious-looking as she hurried to Jed.

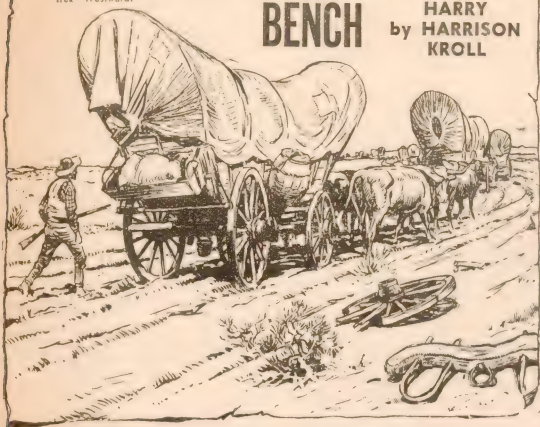
But then there was more than anxiety in her eyes. There was a radiant something that made him know that he had loved her for a very long time, and that she had known it even longer.

In helping folks, he knew now, a man could find unexpected rewards.... ●END

The caravan had started its long trek Westward.

BADMAN ON THE BENCH

HARRY
by HARRISON
KROLL



Hot biscuits for a horsethief! But were they hot biscuits — and was Windy a horsethief?

THE FOREMAN of the emigrant jury rose. His name was Fritz Kramer, and he said in broken English, "Your honor, we find the prisoner guilty of stealing your horse."

Judge Bradshaw was portly and stern. "Windy River Hicks, stand."

Hicks stood. He was twenty-four, dressed in riverman's jeans and hickory, and if he had not been so disheveled by the capture thirty minutes before, he would have passed for quite a handsome kid.

"I have been called a hard man,"

Judge Bradshaw said. "If I actually were, I'd sentence you to hang by the neck till you're dead and let that be the end of you. But seeing as the horse you stole was my own, which might appear to make me prejudiced, I'll postpone the sentence till morning, so's you can study your sins."

"But Judge, I tried to explain that I bought the brute off a trader. I had no idea whatever—"

The Judge waved his hand. "You heard the verdict. These gentlemen—" he indicated the dozen unwashed, unshaved journey-men—"said the



word. They are bound for Oregon and have no time to listen to lame excuses."

"But I am a riverman. I don't know the ways of landlubbers—"

"Sheriff, take him away."

The lawman had been standing in the door of the log courtroom. Just as he advanced, Windy had a vision of a girl. She seemed pretty. But with his mind on the hanging in the morning, women had small place in his soul. "Come along," said the sheriff. He had a saddle leather face and shoe peg whiskers. "Let's have no trouble now, son. You liked to white-eyed me in the chase. I'd hate to shoot you now and ruin the show in the morning."

The jurymen were already dispersing to the huge park of covered wagons at the edge of town. Everywhere were the smells of emigration—dust, sweat, minute particles of pulverized manure, and the towny smells of rotting fruit and vegetables.

The sheriff took Windy to the calaboose out back. He locked him up. He admonished, not without a fatherly touch, "Don't let's us have no trouble now, son. I ain't a man to prank with."

Windy sank on the bench that served as seat and bunk. He groaned and ran his long fingers through his black hair. This business of hanging had happened so suddenly that he just couldn't get accommodated to the thought. Not over an hour ago he had plunked down \$100 in gold for a sound, sleek roan to ride West where fried pigeons flew in your mouth and gold climbed into your pocket. The drover had no more than got out of sight before the sheriff laid a heavy hand on him.

It took a little while to impanel the jury. They had harness to mend, wagons to grease. The Judge promised a good show. Now it was all over except the event. He was dazed. He was actually going to be lynched for stealing a horse. Why, he'd only tasted the rim of the wineglass of life. They could hang a man as young as himself.

He got up stealthily and tried the iron bars. They were solidly set in foot-and-a-half cottonwood logs. The

chain was beyond breaking. His cell was some six by eight feet, with another door which probably let into an adjoining cell, in case there were two horse thieves. The lock on it was half as big as the door itself and it would take a key as big as a bowie knife to unlock it.

"Whut you doing in thar?" the sheriff asked, sticking his nose in the bars.

"Exercising," Windy said.

"You'll get enough of that kicking your legs in the air in the mornin'."

"Going to feed me?"

"Shore. Nigh sundown."

"How about a drink of water?"

"Jug right hyar." He passed a gourd through the bars and filled it from a jug. The stuff was green and hot.

"I keep telling you I bought and paid for that horse! The drover stole it, if anybody did. Why didn't you go after him?"

"You had the hoss. The Judge identified it. The jury found you guilty on the evidence. I never retry a man after he's had his day in court."

"His quarter of an hour, you'd better say!" Windy was bitter. He listened. "What's all the hubbub about?" He referred to the rumble of wheels, the mutter of voices, the sound of brutes, children and dogs.

"That thar's the exodus fixing to travel."

That was the outfit Windy had expected to ride with.

"They waitin' for the moon to rise, the cool of the night, and the dust of the last outfit to settle." He spat and added another mite of interesting gossip. "Judge Bradshaw fixing to ride. Him and his gal."

"But he has to be here in the morning to sentence me—"

"Don't you take up no false hope from that. He'll stay over to tend to the last job of his office. Then he'll ketch the caravan. He'll ride that fine hoss you stole—"

"But I told you I didn't—aw the devil!"

THE SUN sank in a murky cloud of dust. Wood smoke from supper fires drifted in. With dusk there came laughter, song, and the scraping

of a fiddle for young dancers. Dark brought a woman with a basket of grub. The sheriff unlocked the door.

"My old woman. Your supper."

"Hope you enjoy the hot biscuits," the old woman said. "They're wropped up. Take keer."

The lock snapped and the law took up its vigil. Hot biscuits—for a horse thief! Windy didn't have much appetite but he unwrapped the hot biscuits carefully. The old woman must have felt sorry for him. He ate and found himself working to the bottom of the basket. In the very bottom he found, of all things, a key!

A bit of paper attached to it had writing. He was hard put to find light enough to read the message. "9 o'clock tonight. Use the key."

Events were afoot of which he could not guess. He was so shaken by this promise of deliverance that he could hardly creep to the door to try the key and discover that it would turn the lock. Lest a premature attempt at liberty would lead to his being shot instead of hanged, he crept back to his seat.

He tried to think who could have smuggled in the key. Not the old woman; she would do what the sheriff said. He paced the floor. Without a timepiece how would he know when nine o'clock came? He was in agony about the passing of time. He guessed his escape was timed for change of guard. There would not be a moment to spare.

God, he groaned. He peered through the grate, knowing the caravan was scheduled to start about nine. But he could not depend on that. He was aware that the sheriff stood guard outside. The man might or might not carry a watch. A question about the time might rouse suspicion.

When he felt that he could not live through the suspense a sma'l hoarse whisper sounded at the window.

"Nine o'clock."

Windy dared lose a second to see who spoke. He saw no one. The person had drawn back against the wall. Windy knew the sheriff had gone. He groped to the door. His hand shook like a cottonwood leaf in a gale. He managed to fit the key in the lock and turn the bar. The door

squallied when he pulled it open with an effort. Outside was the night, the dim noise, the smells. He made one step and he had freedom in the hollow of his soul.

A horse pawed. It was in the shadow of a nearby outbuilding. Windy darted to the brute. It was the Judge's roan, the horse he was to have been hanged for stealing! He did not argue with his fate. He got into the saddle, trying to make himself small, trying to keep the horse quiet. These next few moments spelled life and death.

Who had got the key to him, had left the horse, saved him? He tried to imagine as he skirted the great camp, and had no answers.

He estimated the number of wagons, thinking there were at least fifty; maybe three hundred oxen, horses and milk cows. He could see the dim shadows of boys who tended the cattle, sheep and goats. Silhouettes of men and women readying to ride moved between him and the dying camp fires. The stir was unmistakable. The outfit was fixing to move.

Windy did not propose to be captured twice. He walked the spirited horse until shed of the town. Then he gave the brute its freedom and galloped through the moonlight and chill air. The road was well marked by the heavy movement of trains which had already gone. Hundreds of wagons, thousands of beasts, had whipped the earth into meal and ruts.

At midnight he came to an abandoned camp where some of the fires still smouldered. He had only the clothes on his back, no blanket, jacket, hat, no money. Nothing but Judge Bradshaw's stolen horse.

There'd be no trial if he were caught again.

HE FOUND a remnant of wood and built up a small blaze to warm by. He lay on the ground, the bridle rein in hand, and slept. He was awakened by the rumble of the advancing column of wagons. He was instantly wide awake and in the saddle. He rode till dawn, shaken down and famished with hunger. He filled his gut with water, let his horse graze, and took stock of his chances

of final escape.

If this should be the caravan the Judge was going Westward with, and the jurors had been drawn from, the worse for him if he were seen by them. On the other hand, he likely could find something to do with such an outfit that would at least give him grub.

If he'd been on the river he would have had no problem. He'd have caught a catfish, knocked it in the head, and cooked and ate it. The ways of landlubbers got him down.

He hid in the tall grass on the sand hills till the outfit caught up. At sunrise the wagons parked. Frying food and hospitable laughter and talk tolled Windy down to pass the time of day with the nearest wagon.

"Howdy. Headed West?"

"More or less," the man answered.

"Kind of mosing in that direction myself. Who's headman of this outfit?" He looked about to see if he recognized anybody.

"Ain't elected no headman yet. Hold elections today, apt as not."

"Know anybody could use a likely hand?"

"If you ain't gunshy of sweat you'll have no trouble getting all the work ye want. What you good at?"

"W-well, mostly I've run the rivers. But I reckon I could drive cows."

They shared breakfast with him. He mingled with other travelers. More than one eyed his horse and several wanted to trade. Windy looked the girls over and found a likely choice of red-cheeked, buxom females, but not one that might have slipped to his calaboose window and whispered "Nine o'clock." These seemed shy.

He made himself handy helping a man fix a wagon wheel, and was not held in less esteem for the service. When he made bold and asked for work a driver said, "With that beastie of yours you'd be good minding the cattle. You could chase up strays." It was the lowliest job of all but Windy figured it would grubstake him and at the same time keep him away from the people a safe distance. This horse was going to be his undoing if he didn't watch out.

The people slept, lying on the

ground or under the wagons snoring. The women and girls washed clothes at the nearby river. There was some politicking for the job of headman, but everything seemed to be suspended, waiting. Windy understood when about noon a light spring wagon drawn by three roans that matched the one he had, and a flea-bitten gray that outraged the matching, drove up and Judge Bradshaw tossed the lines to the girl on the seat beside him, getting out.

"Where's my wagons?" he boomed.

Two wagons, big and heavily loaded, were shown him. Windy shrank to microscopic size but he couldn't hide the horse.

"You ridin' late, Jedge," said a voice.

"It was that blamed horse thief. He'd escaped. I waited to sentence him this morning, just to show I'm not the hard man they say I am, and the dirty son had got out of jail, heaven knows how. The sheriff swore the chain lock hadn't been touched, he'd stood watch all night."

Windy turned his disturbed attention to the girl. It was the same face he had seen for a flash when the jury foreman spoke the verdict. It was this girl that decided him to stick around, for a spell anyway. She climbed into one of the wagons and when she came out she had changed her traveling dress to a homespun that made Windy's head swim. He could think of only her as the one who had freed him. She could have bribed the sheriff's wife, or even the law itself, seeing as Judge Bradshaw was leaving for Oregon. A little gold would grease a big palm. And there was the roan. It all added up.

It put Windy in the middle of a devil of a fix. He couldn't leave and he couldn't stay. He couldn't keep the horse and he couldn't sell it. He did smear the brute with mud, and he himself withdrew to graze the kine. One thing in his favor: Judge Bradshaw was no longer the law. He was just a citizen heading West.

The Judge placed a higher valuation on himself. After refreshing his ample belly with buffalo steak he shouted for the men folk to gather around his wagon. "I have some re-

marks to make to this august company," he stated in stentorian tones.

Windy dared sneak back of a wagon to listen. The Judge was a mighty presence. The flowers that grew on his tongue had a loud perfume. His voice carried like a trumpet. His gestures were magnificent. Every now and then he threw back his long hair, which was streaked with gray in distinguished mixture. In magnetic rhetoric he stated all the reasons why he should be elected captain of the wagon train, and the catalog was convincing.

"For freedom, for fortune, for fame!" the Judge shouted, his hand on his heart and his eyes upward at heaven.

The men looked at his dimpling daughter, and with a howl of acclamation elected him headman.

"Judas!" Windy thought desolately. "He's the law again!"

IT WOULD be all his life was worth now to hang around. But he could not quit the outfit without at least one talk with the girl. Maybe he could stay in the background. The judge might be so engrossed in legislating for the welfare of the train that he wouldn't see Windy. Windy was just another horse thief to him. But there was the horse. Men didn't forget horses.

The outfit started moving again about two of the afternoon. Evidently it had been waiting for the Judge to join up. Windy stayed in the rear, minding the cattle. If it looked like he were in danger, he let a few stray into the sand hills and took off in pursuit of them. Toward night the emigrants stopped and made camp. There was still no order for parking the wagons, as Indian country was yet a long way off. In his investigations Windy discovered Fritz Kramer's wagon. What was even more ominous, Kramer discovered Windy's horse.

"Fine brute. How'd you like to swap?"

"No swapping."

Around the campfires Judge Bradshaw orated, admonishing the travelers to organize. "We shall face the common dangers of the great exodus

as one brave man!"

The people clapped.

Somebody started sawing a fiddle while the Judge was still talking. He thundered, "Leave off that infernal thing!"

Windy had spotted the Judge's wagon park, and he sneaked in while the fiddle and vocal cords contended. There was the girl sitting on the wagon tongue, dejectedly, Windy thought. She must have been drawn by the intensity of his gaze, even in the gloom, for she turned and looked squarely into his eyes. For one long moment they exchanged these unpleasanties. She recognized him.

"You! What are you doing here? Go—get out. Don't you know my father now would hang you with his own hands? Where's your horse?"

"So it was you."

"Me what?"

"Who put the key in the basket, left the horse—"

"What key?" She was haughty. "Certainly not. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then I can tell you," and he told her.

"All right, now you've told me, get out."

"I still have to thank you."

"No—no thanks. All I want you to do is go."

But he loitered anyway. He didn't want to leave her with the idea he was just a horse thief who was too young to die. Likely she was the soft-hearted kind that would open a steel trap to let a polecat escape.

"I'm not a river rat. Just the ordinary kind. My old man was captain of the river steamboat *Fairie Queen*—"

"I don't care anything about that."

"It blew up and I decided I'd try my fortunes in Oregon. I bought that horse off a man who said he was a drover—"

The Judge was coming, and Windy wound up the conversation....

THE CARAVAN moved along day after day. The days were hot and the nights were chill. Windy haunted the outfit discreetly. He knew the girl was watching him; he sus-

pected Kramer was doing the same thing for another motive. Maybe at night he would sneak to the wagon tongue and find food. As long as the Judge orated around the camp fires he was reasonably safe.

When they were following a river he could trap fish in a wicket trap he wove, using his river skills. Once he left a mess of sunfish for the girl. She left him journeybread and cold fry, and a note telling him to go away before he was captured. She seemed so agonized about him that he retreated, allowing the train to proceed without him. But at a great distance he followed. Once the caravan was delayed in quicksands in a stream and he dared show himself long enough to instruct the bull drivers in how to double their ox-power and pull out. Then the trace left the region of streams and entered an unbroken world of grass.

It enabled Windy to keep closer to the train, watching for the trick when Judge Bradshaw's wagons would be the last in line. He rode against the horizon, knowing the girl would see him soon or late. She would hate him but she would know he was there.

One day the outfit broke into two sections. That morning it was late getting in motion, and Windy knew there had been a row and half the wagons were deserting Judge Bradshaw's authority.

Rebellion frequently took place in the caravans, he had heard, though when the broken pieces came to Indian country they usually made peace and joined together against the common enemy. Windy decided which half didn't have the Judge in it, and boldly joined it.

Near sundown one evening the lead unit arrived at a big fat muddy river. Lots of flood eddied in it. There had been rains in the distant mountains, lying day by day against the sky; and this water was boiling down.

The wagons drew up in park to camp for the night. There was a potbellied ferryman here who also ran a jerkwater sawmill. He had prime cottonwood planks he would sell the travelers to mend their wagon bodies. The price was five dollars per board.

There was slab wood from the saw. For this he asked fifty cents per piece. He would set the outfit across in his rickety ferry boat for two dollars per wagon and fifty cents per head of stock. Gold. He had no truck with any other sort of money.

The men gathered hastily. "It's robbery! Whoever heard of such outrageous prices?"

Some were in favor of lynching the ferryman. But more conservative council prevailed. They would sit down and outwait him. Or else they'd wait for the river to go down and ford it. There were, of course, quicksands. Quicksands or no quicksands, they wouldn't be robbed. Just the same, time was draining. Nobody wanted to be caught along the trail in dead of winter. Terrible tales had drifted back about men who had to eat their companions to survive.

The loutish ferryman sat on his fat hams and let the emigrants quarrel it out. Windy projected along the river bank. In a growth of willows there were some Indian canoes. Beyond that he found nothing of interest, not even driftwood for fires.

That night the camp was dark. The next day the other half, with Judge Bradshaw in authority, came up and parked on the far side of the trail. The Judge, as a man of presence, dickered with the ferryman.

"Set you ones acrost for two dollars a wagon, fifty cents for the beasties, in gold."

"Why, you robber! I'll have you hanged!"

"I ain't been hanged yet," the ferryman said significantly.

The Judge fumed and called his men into caucus. The others joined. A vote was taken. Both halves voted overwhelmingly not to pay the exorbitant toll.

"The river will go down," the men said. "We'll wait."

But Windy could have told them the river was rising. He could tell by the chaff and drift and bubbles in the eddies.

The Judge was in a terrible swivet. He had to get where he was going. Windy made one shrewd guess why. When the population in Oregon grew

large enough, state and national officers would be elected. With his pompous presence and great voice, Judge Bradshaw wanted to be on hand with silver oratory and get his name written in history. History won't wait long for a man.

WITH THE Judge's mind on larger cares than unhung horse thieves, Windy decided he dared have a wagon tongue session with Rachel—he'd found this to be her name. While Bradshaw harangued he visited with her.

She said sadly, "I told you not to be caught around here any more."

"I couldn't leave you."

"You can't stay, you know."

"Not long enough to outstay my welcome. But your dad has larger cares on his mind than me."

"He's always had room for a lot of little cares along with the large ones."

She gave him food. "You can tell your pappy that the river's rising."

"If he had his say so, we'd pay and cross. In the long run this delay is going to cost more than the ferry toll."

It was a tender moment, when neither could speak. Windy did not loiter and give her distress. He slipped to the mill shed, tethered his horse, and lay down in the sawdust pile. Maybe it was accident, maybe design, but after dark Judge Bradshaw had his two freight wagons and the light horse wagon draw apart from the rest of the park, not too distant from the landing.

He had bought wood for a campfire, and Windy could see him pacing to and fro, making up that big shaggy head of his. Windy thought with him. The Judge must be on the way. Pushing on hard his outfit might catch up with another before they came to Indian country. These new folk might enjoy his oratory. Unless he got along, another silver-voiced politician would sit in the seat of the mighty.

Windy waked about one o'clock in the morning. The camps were black in sleep. He heard the muffled roll of wheels, the subdued voices of drivers urging their animals onward.

Judge Bradshaw had become a deserter by rolling his two freight wagons on the ferry with the spring wagon, driven by Rachel, in the middle.

"The fool!" Windy said aloud. "The man is loco."

That crazy ferry might carry one wagon and six yoke of oxen, and perhaps the horse wagon into the bargain. Or if the river had been low, the present load would have ridden. But now...

That ferryman was so intent on snatching gold that he'd do anything for a bribe. As Windy watched, the dark shape with its great freight moved through the dark across the dirty water. Windy didn't give a hang about the Judge. Let him learn big rivers the hard way.

But Rachel! He ran down to the river bank and untied one of the canoes. He took off after the ferry boat. On this side the water was easy enough. Not until past midstream did the outfit hit the really fast and treacherous current.

Windy was close behind. The two wagon drivers, with the ferryman, were struggling with the unfamiliar oars. The Judge hung to the sweep. Windy could dimly see Rachel, sitting in the wagon seat. That blamed ferryman, with palm itching for gold, and that fool politician, itching for power!

Well, now they had a mad river to rattle with. The river didn't waste any time with fancy holds. It took one snatch and had the raft and cargo eddying. The second hold and it listed. The wagon on the far side rolled into the river, the bulls making a tangled blur as they struggled to get loose and to swim. The men cursed. Rachel screamed. Her team lunged and into the river she went. The boat lost all balance and the other freight wagon rolled into the current. The ferryboat swam off into the darkness.

If Windy hadn't known rivers and canoes he would have gone down with the rest. He shot his boat straight for the struggling team. He got hold of the girl just as the outfit went under. He hauled her aboard, doing mightily to stay adrift himself. She was half drowned.

"Daddy—"

NO NEED telling her the whole outfit had floundered and likely as not her daddy was drowned. He had his hands full putting back to the east shore. He was carried well downstream, and had to pole his way back up to the camp. Nobody had discovered the rebels. He had to yell out the sleeping people. He was at Kramer's wagon. He soon reported what had happened. Kramer's woman gave Rachel dry clothes. The camps soon were wakened with the news. So Judge Bradshaw, the high and mighty, had deserted!

"Ain't he something to depend on, if we run into Injuns!" Kramer said. "That beast would swap his datter's hair for political hide!"

Windy got some buffalo blankets, put them in the canoe, and braved the black waters to fetch the bedraggled Judge back to camp. "Everything is lost. My wagons, my goods, my stock, my daughter."

"She's safe in camp. I was right behind you and saved her. But I guess I'd better leave you here, Judge. If you go back, they're apt to hang you. Roll up in these blankets." He went back to report to Rachel.

By now dawn was breaking. The perfidy of the Judge was retold over smoking frying pans. With the ferryman out of the way the emigrants stole all the wood and built on big fires. They scanned the other shore but no sign of the wagons.

After breakfast Windy called the men together. "We can set this train across. It'll take stout arms and backs and guts, but here's how."

He led the way to the planks the ferryman wanted five dollars for. In gold. "Maybe they'll be worth it, at that." He showed the bulge-muscled men how to lay these planks across four canoes. Then they put their shoulders to a wagon and rolled it on. "Now, take the paddles, and do what I tell you." He got in the wagon, directed the crossing, and considering it was their first baptism in a bad river, they arrived safely enough. They left the wagon and paddled back for the remainder of their possessions.

One by one, with the loss of but one wagon, they got the whole outfit

across in three days. When finally the back-breaking job was accomplished, and the new camp made, the men gathered to elect a new captain. Before this Windy had been recognized by the jurymen as the horse thief.

"Hoss-Thief Windy River Hicks!" they shouted.

Windy was elected.

"Now we got to try the Jedge for desertion!"

Windy River was chosen to preside over the court. Fritz Kramer empaneled the jury. The twelve men and true sat on wagon tongues while the legal light appointed to defend the Judge harangued the court.

"The Jedge just didn't know his rivers. He knows how to palaver in big words, but dirty water ain't his style."

The prosecution said, "He knows honor. He knows law. He shore knowed what to do with a feller that stole his hoss—or was accused of it. He never even give the pore feller a chance to talk in court."

The jury reported their verdict without quitting the wagon tongues. Kramer reported it. "Guilty, your honor."

"I'll pass sentence in the morning," Judge Windy said. "Men have said I am a horse thief. Never let it be said I didn't let a guilty man suffer twelve hours before hanging him..."

That night Windy slipped to the place where Judge Bradshaw was trying to sleep.

"Get up, Judge."

"What now—"

"Come along." Windy got the Judge's roan horse. Then he took one of the canoes, put the Judge in it, told him to hang onto the horse and swim the brute, and he rowed the Judge across the river. "Ride back to where you came from. I explained everything to Rachel, and she's going on with me. Maybe you can find another outfit to join up with. You may get your name in the history books yet. But you can't hang men without a hearing, and quit them to save your own hide, and see your name written very bold on its pages... Good luck, Judge." ●END

THE TROUBLED GUN

by H. A. DeROSSO

POWERFUL FEATURE-
LENGTH DRAMA

Vengeance, they all figured he wanted. Because he'd been framed to prison by his rival for the hand of pretty Lucy Holbrook. Well, maybe he did want vengeance. . . .

THE RAILROAD had come to Silver Hill during the time that he had been away. He remembered the day of his going as if it had been yesterday instead of ten years ago. He had left in a coach of the Butterfield Line. His wrists had been manacled together and the sheriff had gone along. Now the

railroad was here and he found himself wondering if that was the way they now started the prisoners on the

**EVERYBODY KNEW WHY THE KID
WORE THE BIG .45—
HIS GIRL HAD BEEN
STOLEN WHILE HE
WAS AWAY . . .**

Rendler folded
up in the
saddle as the
.44 roared.



long and lonely journey to the penitentiary.

There was no one to greet him. He had not notified anyone of his coming but then he supposed it would not have made much difference. He had been a criminal and, according to the letter of the law, punished. The fact of his innocence seemed not to have mattered.

He took a room in the Lamar House and lay down at once thinking he was so tired he could sleep. But sleep did not come. The old memories did, though, they came with a needling persistence until he could have cried out in anguish against them, but he clamped his teeth together and forced himself to recall the many useless times he had sobbed out his frustration in prison.

Finally, when he was convinced that sleep would not come for quite a while, he rose and went to the window that looked down on the main drag of Silver Hill. The town had grown. It sprawled over a neighboring hill and he counted three new tailings dumps that he couldn't remember having been there before. He supposed the railroad had aided Silver Hill's growth.

He still could not understand why he'd come back. There were no thoughts of vengeance in his mind. He had not even seriously considered trying to clear his name. He supposed he came back here because it was all the home he ever knew.

With a sigh, he turned from the window and picked his shell belt from where it hung on the brass bedstead. He buckled the belt and holster about him and adjusted the hang of the .44 Colt and then he went out.

On the street he mused that ten years was not such a long time so far as memory went but it did cut a plenty big slice out of a man's life. He was thirty-five now and those were ten youthful years that could never be replaced. It was this that made him feel grim and even mean for a moment.

He started slowly down the street. He saw again the places that he had known and whose memory had tormented him those long and lonely nights in prison. Some of the places

had weathered the time well, some seemed to have wasted as his own life had wasted, here and there a new structure reared. This then was Silver Hill after ten years and he still did not know why he had come back.

THE SIGN of the Longhorn Bar had been freshly painted and included the name of a proprietor he did not recall. Nevertheless, he went in here, because he had always fancied the Longhorn over the other saloons in town.

He had never seen the bartender before. He ordered a beer and stood with his elbows hooked on the mahogany bar while he sipped slowly at his drink. He was aware of a few other drinkers in the place but he paid them no heed. If no one remembered after ten years, he felt it was all for the better.

Someone said, "Hello, Steve. It's been a long time."

He came to with a start. It had been almost like a dream this moving about without hearing the sound of a friendly voice. Now it was reality again and for him reality was seldom pleasant. He was slow in responding and turning around.

"You're Steve Cameron, aren't you?" the voice said.

He turned now, thinking that prison must have changed him a lot, perhaps more than he had thought. He knew he was gaunt and he remembered seeing himself in a barber's mirror, all hollow in the cheeks and tight about the mouth and maybe even mean in the eyes unless the squint there was something he had picked up in the gloom of the many prison nights.

He looked at the other and remembered instantly. "Hello, Carey," he said.

Carey Rendler stuck out a hand and smiled. "Welcome back to Silver Hill, Steve," he said. "Welcome home."

Steve Cameron took the hand. He did not speak. His throat was suddenly too full.

Carey Rendler ordered two beers and picked them up in one hand and with the other he led Cameron to a table in the rear. He waved Cameron

to a chair and then Rendler seated himself across from Cameron.

"It's good to see you, Steve," said Rendler. "I was wondering if you'd come back to Silver Hill when they let you out."

Cameron said nothing. He stared at Rendler. They were of an age but the years had been kind to Carey Rendler. He looked hale and hearty, there was the beginning of a paunch beneath his belt. His complexion was as red as it had always been and his bright blue eyes still had a sly way of looking at things, as if they were cleverly concealed and were surreptitiously watching without anyone being aware. Ten years ago Rendler had been clean-shaven but now he affected a tawny mustache that drooped down around the corners of his mouth.

"I suppose you're anxious to get caught up on the news," Rendler said.

"Not particularly," said Cameron.

Rendler arched a brow. "I think you're going to like this," he said.

Cameron did not speak. He sat there, watching Carey Rendler. They had never been too close although they had known each other all their lives. Rendler had always been on the lookout for the fast and easy dollar and it was this about him that Cameron had never liked.

The glitter in Rendler's eyes seemed to brighten. "Tom Holbrook's in jail," he said quietly.

Mention of the name put a brief spasm of hurt and anger through Cameron's heart. However, his face revealed nothing. He stared steadily at Rendler.

"You're taking it kind of easy," Rendler said. He appeared to be thinking about something. After a moment, he said, "If I'd known you were coming back, Steve, I'd have waited."

"Waited for what?"

"I'm the one who swore out the complaint against Holbrook."

"What did he do?"

"Rustled some of my cows. Me and Mike Downey—you remember him—caught Holbrook at it. He was changing my Lazy F into his 44 brand. He should get a stretch in the pen

for that. Make you feel any better?"

Cameron said nothing. He was staring down at the tabletop but he was not seeing it. His eyes were looking into the window of the dark and lonely past.

Rendler made a small, helpless gesture. "I know he's your meat, Steve, and I'd have saved him for you if I'd known you were coming back to Silver Hill, but—"

"What do you mean 'he's my meat'?"

Rendler paused as if taken aback. His brows lifted. Then he gave a small, embarrassed laugh. "Well, you know, Steve. Him and Lucy—" He let it lie like that.

The pain was there in Cameron's heart. The mere mention of her name had been enough to bring it back. He had been positive it would never hurt him again as he had had ten years to reconcile himself to it but now he knew how false that supposition had been. It was the kind of hurt that would remain with him as long as he drew a breath.

When Cameron did not speak, Rendler went on, "I know it kind of throws you off, Steve. I'm sorry as all get-out. You always said you were framed for that robbery ten years ago and if anyone did any framing it was Tom Holbrook because he wanted you out of the way so he could marry Lucy. I know what you've got in mind and I'm—"

Cameron reached out suddenly and grabbed the front of Rendler's shirt. Cloth ripped. Cameron's voice was low and quivering with fury.

"You don't know nothing about what's in my mind, Carey!"

Rendler was up taut and straight in the chair. For an instant his eyes were startled and unbelieving, then they grew sly again. They seemed to withdraw and study Cameron from a great and secret distance. Cameron finally released his hold. Rendler rose to his feet.

"Be seeing you, Steve," he said. He was smiling a little as he walked off...

THE MORNING of the next day Steve Cameron saddled his bay and rode out of Silver Hill. Even

after ten years habit made him take the Dry Creek trail, but then he realized that this had been in his mind all the time.

He'd owned a ranch up this way. He had been struggling along, deep in debt but nevertheless seeing an eventual way out of it, when the Los Pinos stage had been held up and robbed. Because of his indebtedness and because a bar of silver bullion had been found buried under one of his corral posts, he had been found guilty and sentenced to the territorial penitentiary.

The loss of his ranch had not been unexpected. It now belonged to another and he found time to muse that the two things which once had been his whole life—his ranch and Lucy Barnes—were now in the possession of others.

When he reached the gate of the ranch, he found that even the brand was changed. A sign tacked on a post proclaimed this to be the "Double O, Ransom Wilson, Prop." The name was unknown to Cameron. Thus the changeover was complete. Nothing remained to link this place with his past except the never-fading memory that plagued his mind.

He did not set foot on even an inch of the land that once had almost been his. He reined the bay around and rode away, thinking that nothing had been accomplished by his coming out here. He was pondering hard now but he still could not figure out why he had come back.

He left the trail and rode the bay to high ground from where he could look out over the land that had been his only home. It was a harsh and lonely country yet he loved the desolate look of the sage and mesquite and greasewood. He had not realized how much he loved it until he had been shut away in the penitentiary.

Reining in the bay, he hooked a long leg about the saddlehorn and built himself a cigarette. The butt burned down to his fingers and he tossed it away and it was then that he saw the rider leave the trail and start up the slope toward him.

Even at a distance he knew who it was. Neither ten years nor a hun-

dred could dim this remembrance. The old pain folded itself about his heart again and stayed there, even though he clearly understood and thus had never experienced any rancor or recrimination. Nevertheless, it had always hurt, in a faint and persistent way.

She rode a palomino whose hide shone in the sun like burnished gold. She reined in the horse and Cameron was instantly aware of the piercing way she looked at him, noting the gauntness of his features, the lines of suffering still etched faintly about his mouth, and then picking out the bits of gray at his temples.

"Hello, Steve," she said, her lips moving stiffly without the trace of a smile or warmth on them.

He merely inclined his head because he did not trust himself to speak. He gazed at her and knew now why he had come back, only for this one look. There was nothing else in it for him. He would take this one look and make it last the rest of his life. He felt it was not right to ask for more.

SHE HAD aged, too, but with her it was all for the good. There was an appealing maturity in the clear and direct look in her gray eyes and in the way the skin was drawn tight across her high cheekbones. There were squint wrinkles at the corners of her lashes and sun and wind had darkened her skin but to Cameron she was more beautiful now than she had ever been. He could find no trace of gray in her raven-black hair.

She was wearing a stiff-brimmed, black charro hat and a white cotton blouse open enough at the neck so that he could spy the first faint rise of her breasts, and a black divided skirt and a wide, black belt studded with silver conchas that flashed in the light of the sun.

"How are you, Steve?" she said when he did not speak.

"All right."

"I only found out this morning that you'd come back. When I went to look you up, they told me you had ridden out this way."

"What is it you want?"

She did not answer right away. She appeared to be thinking and whatever it was that she ran through her mind could not have been pleasant for a drop of wetness gathered at each corner of her eyes.

When she spoke, it was barely above a whisper. "I meant to write to you and explain but every time I sat down I just didn't know how to put it into words. I—"

"Look," he said, bending forward a little in earnestness. "I'm going to tell it to you only this once. It wasn't exactly a happy time for me, Lucy, but I always saw your side of it. I certainly didn't expect you or want you to give up ten years of your life. I hold nothing against you because you married. What you did was a natural thing. Let's never talk about it again."

She bowed her head and was a while like that. When she finally lifted her face, her eyes were dry and clear. "Thank you, Steve," she said.

"Now what is it you want of me?"

The directness of her eyes faltered. "I—I don't know how to put it."

"You've known me a long time. You needn't be embarrassed about anything."

"It's about Tom," she said, and halted as if in confusion.

He said nothing.

When she saw that he was not going to speak, she drew a breath and went on, "I know you and Tom never got along and now you've got a good reason for not helping him and if you won't I'll never blame you. But I don't know who else to turn to, Steve. If Tom was guilty, I'd just have to admit that he had it coming but he's innocent, Steve. It just doesn't make sense. Tom is well off. We've done well the past five years. Why would he jeopardize everything we have to rustle a few steers?"

"This is all Carey Rendler's doing. You know how shiftless and scheming he's always been. He bought the old Maxwell place next to ours and he took the Lazy F brand because it can be changed into Tom's 44 iron. Then Rendler and Mike Downey changed a few of their Lazy Fs into

Tom's 44 and branded a couple of their own calves with a 44 so they'd be following a Lazy F mother and that's how they've framed Tom. Can't you see, Steve? Won't you help me?"...

CAMERON did not return to Silver Hill. That night he slept under the stars and it was a fitful sleep that was more a brooding wakefulness than any actual drowsing. In any event, he had a lot of time in which to consider everything and even before the break of dawn his mind was made up.

He reached Carey Rendler's ranch while the sun was still a glow behind the distant mountain range. However, Cameron rode nowhere near the buildings. He dismounted on a hilltop in the shelter of some mesquite and from there he watched the layout of Lazy F.

After the sun had cleared the top of the mountain, Cameron saw two men moving about in the yard below. The two saddled horses and rode off in opposite directions. Cameron waited until he discerned which one was Mike Downey. Then Cameron got on his bay and followed, careful to keep out of Downey's sight.

It was the middle of the morning before Cameron spurred his bay to overtake Downey. Downey heard the sound of the running horse behind him and it brought him hipping around in his kak. Surprise and startlement pulled Downey's mouth agape a moment and then he reined in his grulla mare and waited.

Cameron pulled up the bay and dismounted. His eyes were narrowed as he stared up at Mike Downey. Downey was a big, gross man with jowls that overflowed the tightly buttoned collar of his shirt and a paunch that lapped over the buckle of his belt. He had a bright red nose marked with tiny purple veins and the color of his eyes was perpetually shot with the suffering of a morning after.

Cameron said, "Get off your horse, Mike."

Puzzlement furrowed Downey's brow. His mouth opened and stayed that way without a sound emerging.

Finally, he closed it.

"Get off your horse," Cameron said again. "I want to talk to you, Mike."

"What do you want to talk about?" Downey said at last. He had a whistle-hoarsened voice.

"Get down and I'll tell you."

Downey dismounted from the grulla with obvious reluctance. There was a bit of apprehension in his eyes as he stared at Cameron.

"What's on your mind, Steve?"

"How come you're working for Carey?"

Downey spread his hands. "A job's a job."

"What does Carey pay you?"

"Regular wages."

Cameron's voice was soft. "How do you earn them, Mike?"

Downey's mouth gaped a moment. Then he said, "I don't get you."

"You're a good hand with a bottle, Mike," said Cameron, "but that's about all. You were never good for anything else. Why does Carey keep you on?"

"You can't talk to me like that," Downey said indignantly.

"I'll talk to you any way I please," said Cameron. "What do you do to earn your keep? Do you go around changing the Lazy F brand into a 44?"

Downey tried a scoffing laugh but it did not ring true. "Why would I want to do a thing like that?"

"So that another man could be framed."

"You're crazy, Steve! Tom Holbrook did the brand changing. He was stealing Carey blind."

"I say you and Carey did the brand changing!"

DOWNNEY was silent a while. His paunch rose and fell as he breathed, the sound of it was an audible rasp in his throat. At last he said, "You're talking wild, Steve. Where is the sense in a thing like that? Even if what you say is true, where would the percentage be? Carey doesn't get anything out of it even with Tom Holbrook in jail. There would have to be something in it for Carey before he did a crazy thing like that."

"There's plenty in it for Carey,"

said Cameron. "He was always one to look far ahead. He's probably got it figured that with Holbrook in the pen, he can start running off 44's cows and in general make enough trouble for 44 that in a couple of years he can buy it cheap. Isn't that what Carey's got in mind?"

Downey's mouth gaped again and then he seemed to catch hold of himself. A look of shrewdness entered his eyes. "How come you're talking this way, Steve? You don't make sense. Why should you care what happens to Tom Holbrook? You should be glad he's headed for the pen. Didn't he marry your girl? Didn't—"

Cameron hit Downey then. He hit Downey on the mouth and the man went stumbling back to bring up hard and reeling against the grulla. The sudden impact startled the horse and it shied away and Downey fell to the ground.

As he got up, Cameron hit him again. Downey cried out and turned half around with the force of the blow. He put his arms up over his face and placed his back to Cameron and cowered there.

"I ain't hitting back," he said, his voice a hoarse, quivering moan. "I ain't fighting back."

"I don't expect you to fight back," said Cameron. "I only want the truth from you. Are you giving it to me, Mike?"

"You've already had the truth," said Downey.

Cameron grabbed Downey's shoulder and whirled the man around. Cameron drove his left fist deep in Downey's paunch. Downey gaped in pain and his arms dropped from in front of his face. Cameron hit him there and Downey fell.

There was only rage in Cameron now. All the years of loneliness and humiliation and frustration had been building up to this moment of savage release. He had known so much hurt in the past that it now gave him a perverted, frightening pleasure to be dealing out some hurt himself.

Downey made no attempt to rise. Cameron reached down and with both hands he pulled Downey to his feet and when Downey was there,

Cameron hit him and knocked him down again. Downey was sobbing with hurt and fear now.

"Please, Steve, please," he begged.

There was no pity in Cameron, only an ugly relentlessness. He started to pull Downey to his feet again. Downey's face was contorted with hurt and fright, his lips and nose were bleeding.

"All right," cried Downey, his voice thick, "I'll tell you how it really was, Steve, only don't hit me again..."

The dirty business was over, Cameron thought, and now there was nothing to hold him in Silver Hill any more. He had had his one last look of Lucy and, in addition, he had done something which he still could not explain. He had cleared the name of his enemy, the man who had framed him into the penitentiary, while his own name was still clouded with dishonor.

SO CAMERON rode out of Silver Hill without waiting for any thanks which to him would be only sickening. Tom Holbrook had been released from jail and in his place was Mike Downey. Carey Rendler had not been apprehended yet.

Cameron experienced a growing reluctance. He could not quite understand it. There was nothing good for him in Silver Hill. There were only plaguing memories and regrets and the constant, heart-rending reminder of what might have been. It really was best for him to leave all this behind but he found it very difficult to do.

Several miles out of town, he reined in the bay on top of a hill. He was sitting there in the saddle, quietly contemplating the country, when he saw the rider emerge from a wash and start toward him. Recognition came instantly to Cameron and a cold hand seemed to caress his heart.

The rider was Carey Rendler.

He approached without hurry, almost with indifference, but nevertheless there was something portentous in the way he rode. He let the horse pick its own sweet time about coming up the hill. Rendler rode drooped a little in the saddle and he swayed

automatically with each movement of his roan. There was no sense of urgency about him except for the unflinching directness of his gaze. It never left Cameron's face.

Cameron waited. He realized that he might be waiting for death but the thought neither frightened nor excited him. He supposed that death held terror only when a man had something to live for. With him, however, there was little to choose between living and dying.

When he was about ten feet away, Rendler pulled in his roan. Rendler did not speak. He sat there quietly in his kak, his glance fastened on Cameron's face. Rendler's mouth looked pinched in the corners and the muscles were taut along the ridge of his jaw as if he were forcibly containing a great, consuming anger.

Cameron said not a word. There was need for none. The time for talking lay in the past. What existed now between them could neither be removed nor alleviated by words. They each had a gun and it was these that would provide the final, conclusive settlement to the strife between them.

Cameron saw it come in a sudden heightening of the brightness in Rendler's eyes. Cameron drew. He saw the gun come out of Rendler's holster and rise and for a heart-chilling instant the big muzzle gaped at Cameron's heart. Then Cameron's .44 roared and swift on its heels came the bark of Rendler's weapon but it was still an echo and the barrel was already wavering so that the bullet went wild.

Rendler folded up in his saddle, slowly and gently, as if he were immensely tired. His head dropped first and then his shoulders began to sag and he bent all the way over until his stomach ground against the saddlehorn. Then his roan gave a sudden lurch and this unseated Rendler. He flew out of the saddle with an aimless, grotesque flapping of arms and legs and he was already dead when he hit the ground....

THAT EVENING, Cameron camped at the foot of the mountain range. He was sitting there, star-

ing into the flames of his fire, when he heard the sounds in the darkness. They were the noises of two horses approaching. Cameron rose to his feet and stepped back until he was out of the range of the firelight. He stood with his hand on his gun, listening to the horses come nearer.

They halted while still concealed by the dark. Cameron heard the squeak of saddle leather as the riders dismounted. There was a brief murmur of voices and a moment later someone came walking into the light of the fire.

It was Lucy Holbrook.

Cameron was sorry now he had stopped. He should have kept on going all night until he would have been well rid of this country and its people. This was the reason he had not stayed in Silver Hill. He had not wanted to see Lucy again but now she was here, sight of her putting that hopeless anguish in his heart once more.

He walked slowly up to her. He felt angry and disgusted.

"I'm so glad I found you, Steve," she said. "Why did you leave so suddenly? You must have known I'd want to thank you."

He did not look at her face. It hurt too much when he saw the shape of her mouth. He could not bear looking at any part of her. He peered off into the darkness.

"Who came with you?" he asked. "Tom."

He said nothing. He knew a swift surge of hate and hoped it did not show on his features but he felt the tightening of his lips and the angry narrowing of his eyes.

"He didn't know how you'd take it, Steve," she said. "He wants to thank you but he doesn't know how you'd feel about it. Is it all right for him to come in?"

He did not answer. She reached out and touched his arm. "Please, Steve," she said, tears in her voice. "It means everything to me. I don't want the two of you hating each other. Won't you do it? For me?"

This was his weakness, he thought. For her, he'd do anything, even when there was nothing in it for him. If it hadn't been for her, he would have

let Holbrook rot in prison as he himself had rotted. It would have been a fair exchange. But she had asked a favor of him and he had agreed—as he would always agree, which was the reason he was leaving this country for good now.

"Please, Steve," she said, her fingers digging into his arm.

He did not want to accede but because it was her asking he nodded. She called out her husband's name. She and Cameron were both startled when the faint jingle of spurs sounded behind them. They turned and saw Tom Holbrook.

He came into view with a tight little smile on his lips. He had always been heavy-built but to Cameron he seemed even more so now. He had a wide, darkly-handsome face that at this moment seemed alive with a glowing excitement. The gun in his hand was pointed at Cameron's heart.

Lucy cried out when she saw this. It was a forlorn sound in the sudden stillness. Cameron felt himself go cold with helpless rage and fear and then, abruptly, he ceased to care. His last illusion had been broken. She had been a party to its shattering and now for Cameron the world held nothing.

"Take his gun, Lucy," Holbrook said.

"Tom?" she cried, a shrill, querying note in her tone.

Holbrook's voice hardened. "I said take his gun!"

SHE MADE a small, whimpering sound and then Cameron felt the weight going out of his holster. He did not look at her but he was conscious of her standing to one side with his gun held tightly in both hands. Her breathing was a hard, rapid whisper in his ears.

"Tom?" she whimpered again.

The smile became a snarling grimace on Holbrook's mouth. "How dumb do you think I am?" he said. "He might have fooled you but he didn't fool me."

"What do you mean, Tom?"

"Do you think he got me out of jail out of the goodness of his heart? He wanted me out so he could kill me!"

"Oh, Tom, you've got it all wrong. He did it because I asked it of him. Now he's leaving the country. He didn't even wait to be thanked. Can't you see?"

"I see, all right," said Holbrook, his voice hoarse with hate. "He might be going but that doesn't mean he wouldn't be back. He wants me to stew and fret a while and then he plans on returning when I've begun to think he wasn't ever coming back. It's his way of getting even with me but I'm a little too smart for him. I've always been too smart for him."

"I wouldn't call it smart," said Cameron. "'Sneaky' would be a better word."

"So you've got a tongue?" said Holbrook with a sneer. "Little good it will do you, however."

"What are you going to do, Tom?" asked Lucy.

"I'm going to kill him!"

"No!" she cried, voice thick with horror. "You can't do a thing like that. No, Tom!"

"It's either him or me, Lucy."

"That's right, Lucy," said Cameron, his lips stiff with anger and hate. "He has to kill me because as long as I'm alive there's always the chance I might prove he held up the Los Pinos stage and framed me into the pen. He has no choice but to kill me, Lucy."

"It's not true," cried Lucy. "Say it isn't true, Tom."

"Tell her, Tom," said Cameron. "Lie to her and tell her it's not true. You should be able to convince her. Lying and all the other yellow, sneaking things come pretty easy to you. Go on and tell her, Tom."

Holbrook's teeth showed white in a snarl of ferine hate. "You're trying to force my hand, aren't you, Steve?" he said with a quiet ferocity. "You know you're gonna die and you want it over with. Well, you're not hurrying me, and when you do get it, it's going to be in the belly and I'm going to stand and watch you die inch by inch."

He gave an ugly laugh that sent a chill down Cameron's spine.

"Sure, Steve, I'll tell her," Holbrook went on. "What if she does know the truth? She's my wife, isn't

she? A wife can't testify against her husband. So she might as well know the truth. Steve is right, Lucy. I held up the Los Pinos stage ten years ago. I planted that bar of silver bullion in his corral. How else do you think I got the money to get started in the cattle business? There, Steve, I've told her. Does it make you feel any better?"

Lucy was crying. "Don't joke about a thing like that, Tom. Please don't joke about it."

"It's no joke, Lucy," said Holbrook. "When you see Steve with a couple of slugs in his belly, you'll know then it's no joke."

"Don't talk like that, Tom," she begged. "Not after everything he has done for you. He helped you out of a jail sentence after all you had done to him. He was willing to forget everything. Can't you do as much?"

"He's not forgetting anything," Holbrook snarled. "He means to kill me someday."

Lucy was still crying. "Don't make me stop loving you, Tom. Please don't make me do that."

"You'll get over it," Holbrook said callously. "You'll cry a while but you'll get over it." His teeth showed white again and there was a harsh note of evil in his voice. "Here it comes, Steve. A red hot slug in the belly. Don't forget to tell me how you like it."

The roar of the gun was loud and strident in Cameron's ears. He wondered that he felt nothing but maybe that was how it was at first. Maybe it was only numbness at the beginning with the pain to follow soon after but as of now he could not feel even the numbness. Yet a gun had blasted and there could have been no missing at that range.

He stared unbelievably at Holbrook. There was a look of vast astonishment on the man's face. His mouth gaped wordlessly and he seemed to be straining in an effort to say something but only strangled sounds emerged from his throat. The gun fell from his hand and he clasped both palms against his chest and it was then that Cameron saw the blood squeezing through Holbrook's fingers.
(please turn to page 62)

THE LAST SCALP

W. K.

by PUTNEY

ON THE upper Scioto River, near the present town of Kenton, Ohio, the early settlers knew Bill Quick as a fast-shooting, dead-eye hunter, and with a temper and determination the equal of his work with a rifle. He lived in a small cabin, with his aged father, at some distance from the nearest settlement with no close neighbors to bother him. Most of his time was spent in hunting, for his livelihood depended upon furs he could trade for food, supplies and some money. While he was away, his father was alone at the cabin, but not lonely, for he loved that wild country and found plenty to occupy his attention while Bill was away.

One day when Bill returned, his father alarmed him by saying,

"Son, there are unfriendly Indians about. I saw them skulking around this afternoon."

Bill Quick did not wish to have his father note his own alarm and so tried to pass it off lightly as he said, "I doubt if there is anything for worry, Dad. We often have strange Indians around and they always want to find out how things are before they get too friendly."

But he was worried plenty. He, too, had noted tracks when he was out hunting and two other hunters had told him there were hostile redmen in the vicinity. They advised him to move into the settlement, where there was a fort, until those Indians had left the region, but Bill Quick was obdurate. He was not going to let a few stray Indians chase him of his own property. He

could shoot with the best redman that ever lived.

A couple of days later, when Bill Quick returned from a hunting trip, he was surprised that there was no light in the cabin. It was getting pretty dark and usually his father had the light on long before it got as dark as it was now. Hurrying to the door, he opened it and called,

"Dad! Dad! Are you asleep? Is anything the matter? Don't you feel well? Answer me, Dad."

There was no response to his call and he stepped in and lighted a flare.

By this light he saw what he had feared for several days. Aghast he stood in the middle of the room and looked around. His father lay in a pool of his own blood, on the floor, his scalp torn from his head. The cabin had been turned upside down. His furs were gone, everything of value taken. Only the table, bunks and chairs remained. He looked down upon his father again for a long moment, then turned and sat

down at the table. His head dropped to his arms and he sobbed. Then, after his spasm of grief was over, he leaned low toward the inert form on the floor and said, in a low, husky voice,

"Dad, you'll be avenged. I'll see to that."

He carried his father to the bunk and laid him tenderly on a blanket. The following afternoon he dug the grave and buried his father, after which he promised,

"I swear this over your grave. I shall avenge your death a hundred fold."



"I swear this: I shall avenge your death a hundred fold." — So vowed Bill Quick over the grave of his father. But ninety-nine Indians were all he could find . . .

FROM THAT day the Indians had had plenty of reason to regret ransacking the cabin of Bill Quick and murdering his father. One by one redmen fell dead to the sod, and one by one a gruesome collection was started on the shelves of Bill Quick's cabin—the skulls of these Indians. There was never a witness to the killings—none could see the hand that threw a knife, fired from behind brush, or twirled a riata around the neck of a lonely redman. There were a dozen ways in which the Indians met death and yet the killer was never seen.

Bill Quick had refurnished his cabin, more simply than before, and the shelves were new—something the cabin had not seen when Bill Quick's father was living. One by one the gruesome relics of the hunt accumulated until the number had reached fifty. Then the collection grew more slowly because the Indians, afraid of the unseen avenger, were leaving the region. It took some years to bring the number, finally up to ninety-nine.

Only one more scalp was needed—then the vow would have been fulfilled. But securing that hundredth skull seemed more and more an impossibility. Now there was not an Indian village within many miles, and hunters among the redmen carefully avoided any return to the place where their brothers had lost their lives, and heads.

Bill Quick worried; then he took to drinking to forget the dread of having his father haunt him because he had not carried out in full his oath of revenge. Night after night Bill Quick would moan in his sleep, "Only one more, Dad, only one more!"

With the passing of years Bill Quick also lost much of his old-time skill with a rifle and his eyes were getting bad. This, too, hurt his pride and he drank still more heavily, and it was when in his cups that Bill boasted of his skill in shooting and his array of Indian skulls in his cabin on the upper Scioto River. His friends tried to dissuade him from even attempting getting the

last one to complete the collection, but the gang around the bar took keenest pleasure in goading him to boast and tell how he was going to accomplish that task.

One night, after his usual libations, he became very loquacious and boastful—much more than usual. The gang taunted him and roared in laughter. Bill Quick's most sensitive spot was touched deeply. He hated to be laughed at.

"All right," he said, "I'm telling you. I'll have that hundredth skull on my shelf by tomorrow at sunset, or my name ain't Bill Quick! Yes sir, *by sunset tomorrow!*"

Bill did not tell them that during that morning another hunter told him that Indian tracks had been set not far from Bill's cabin. But the tormentors thought this was a still bigger joke and taunted him unmercifully so that Bill Quick was furious when he returned home to his cabin about midnight.

On going inside, Bill lighted a flare and looked at his shelves. His liquor befogged eyes made it seem as if the skulls also were taunting him. He sat on the edge of his bunk and glared at them.

"Laugh, you fools!" he yelled. "Blast y' all! You won't laugh tomorrow when the last skull goes up in its place. You wait and see. The hundredth skull will be there tomorrow before sunset. Baaaah!"

He woke, the next day, about noon and, after a hasty meal, grabbed his gun and went out. A couple of hours later a settler a mile away heard a shot and went out to investigate. All he saw was a pair of Indians running away. The next morning this same neighbor-settler went to Bill Quick's cabin. There was no response to his rap on the door, no invitation to enter. But the door was not locked and he went in. He called, but still no reply. Then out of curiosity, he glanced at the collection of skulls on the shelves. At the very end of the last shelf was a fresh one—the hundredth skull, still bloody, a bullet hole in the forehead and the scalp gone.

That hundredth skull was that of Bill Quick! ● END

WHEN A TEXAN TAKES OVER

by LOUIS L'AMOUR

WHEN MATT RYAN saw the cattle tracks on Mocking Bird he swung his horse over under the trees and studied the terrain with a careful eye. For those cattle tracks meant rustlers were raiding the KY range.

For a generation the big KY spread had been the law in the Slumbering Hill country, but now the old man was dying and the wolves were coming out of the breaks to tear at the body of the ranch.

And there was nobody to stop them, nobody to step into the big tracks old Tom Hitch had made, nobody to keep law in the hills now that old Tom was dying. He had built an empire of land cattle, but he had also brought law into the outlaw country, brought schools and a post office, and the beginnings of thriving settlement.

But they had never given up, not Indian Kelly nor Lee Dunn. They'd

waited back in the hills, bitter with their own poison, waiting for the old man to die.

All the people in the Slumbering Hill country knew it, and they had looked to Fred Hitch, the old man's adopted son, to take up the job when the old man put it down. But Fred was an easy-going young man who liked to drink and gamble. And he spent too much time with Dutch Gerlach, the KY foreman...and who had a good word for Dutch?

"This is the turn, Red," Ryan told his horse, "they know the old man will never ride again, so they have started rustling."

It was not just a few head...there must have been forty or more in this bunch, and no attempt to cover the trail.

In itself that was strange. It seemed they were not even worried about what Gerlach might do...and what would he do? Dutch Gerlach

There was a sixshooter in his belt and a Winchester in his saddle boot—yet the stranger wanted no part of any gun ruckus...

Matt shot at
the middle of
the man's body.



was a tough man. He had shown it more than once. Of course, nobody wanted any part of Lee Dunn, not even Gerlach.

Matt Ryan rode on, but kept a good background behind him. He had no desire to sky-line himself with rustlers around.

For three months now he had been working his placer claim in Pima Canyon, just over the ridge from Mocking Bird. He had a good show of color and with persistent work he made better than cowhand's wages. But lately he was doing better. Twice in the past month he had struck pockets that netted him nearly a hundred dollars each. The result was that his last month had brought him in the neighborhood of three hundred in gold.

Matt Ryan knew the hills and the men who rode them. None of them knew him. Matt had a streak of Indian in his nature if not in his blood, and he knew how to leave no trail and travel without being seen. He was around, but not obvious.

They knew somebody was there, but who and why or where did they not know, and he liked it that way. Once a month he came out of the hills for supplies, but he never rode to the same places. Only this time he was coming back to Hanna's Stage Station. He told himself it was because it was close, but down inside he knew it was because of Kitty Hanna.

She was something who stepped out of your dreams, a lovely girl of twenty in a cotton dress and with carefully done hair, with large, dark eyes and a mouth that would set a man to being restless...

MATT RYAN had stopped by two months before to eat a woman-cooked meal and to buy supplies, and he had lingered over his coffee.

He was a tall, wide-shouldered young man with a slim, long-legged body and hands that swung wide of his narrow hips. He had a wedge-shaped face and green eyes, and a way of looking at you with faint humor in his eyes.

He carried a gun, but he carried it tucked into his waist-band, and he carried a Winchester that he never left on his saddle.

Nobody knew him around the Slumbering Hills, nobody knew him anywhere this side of Texas...they remembered him there. His name was a legend on the Neuces.

Big Red ambled on down the trail and Matt watched the country and studied the cattle tracks. He would remember those horse tracks, too. Finally the cow tracks turned off into a long valley and when he sat his horse he could see dust off over there where Thumb Butte lifted against the sky.

Indian Kelly...not Dunn this time, although Dunn might have given the word.

Kitty was pouring coffee when he came in and she felt her heart give a tiny leap. It had only been once, but she remembered, for when his eyes touched her that time it made her feel the woman in her...a quick excitement such as she felt now.

Why was that? This man whom she knew nothing about? Why should he make her feel this way?

He put his hat on a hook and sat down, and she saw that his hair was freshly combed and still damp from the water he had used. That meant he had stopped back there by the creek...it was unlike a drifting cowhand, or had it been for her?

When he looked up she knew it had, and she liked the smile he had and the way his eyes could not seem to leave her face. "Eggs," he said, "about four of them, and whatever vegetable you have, and a slab of beef. I'm a hungry man."

She filled his cup, standing very close to him, and she saw the red mount under his dark skin and when she moved away it was slowly, and there was a little something in her walk. Had her father seen it he would have been angry, but this man would not be angry, and he would know it was for him.

Dutch Gerlach came in, a big, brawny man with bold eyes and careless hands. He had a wide, flat face and a confident, knowing manner that she hated. Fred Hitch was with him.

They looked at Ryan, then looked again. He was that sort of man, and something about him irritated Gerlach. But the big foreman of the KY said nothing. He was watching Kitty.

GERLACH seated himself and shoved his hat back on his head. When his meal was put before him he began to eat, his eyes following the girl. Fred seemed preoccupied, he kept scowling a little and he said something under his breath to Dutch.

Gerlach looked over at Matt Ryan. "Ain't seen you around before," he said.

Ryan merely glanced at him, and continued eating. The eggs tasted good, and the coffee was better than his own.

"Hear what I said?" Gerlach demanded.

Ryan looked up, studying the bigger man calmly. "Yes," he said, "and the remark didn't require an answer."

Gerlach started to speak, then devoted himself to his food.

"That bay horse yours?" Fred Hitch asked suddenly.

Ryan nodded... they had seen the horse, then? That was one trouble with Big Red, he was a blood-bay, and he stood out. It would have been better to have a dun or a buckskin... even a black.

"It's mine," he said.

Yet their curiosity and Fred's uneasiness puzzled him. Why should Fred be bothered by him?

"Don't take to strangers around here," Gerlach said suddenly. "You move on."

Ryan said nothing, although he felt something inside of him grow poised and waiting. *No trouble, Matt, he warned himself, not here...*

"Hear me?" Gerlach's voice rose. "We've missed some cows."

Kitty had come to the door, and her father was behind her. Hanna was a peace-loving man, but a stern one.

"I heard you," Ryan replied quietly, "an' if you've missed cows, ride toward Thumb Butte."

Fred Hitch jerked as if he had been slapped, and Gerlach's face went slowly dark. His eyes had been truculent, now they were cautious, studying. "What's that mean?" he asked, his voice low.

"Ain't that where Indian Kelly hangs out?" Ryan asked mildly.

"You seem to know," Gerlach was suddenly cold. "I figure you're a rustler your ownself!"

It was fighting talk, gun-talk. Matt

Ryan made no move. He forked up some more eggs. "One man's opinion," he said. "But what would make you think that? You've never seen me with a rope on my saddle, you've never even seen me before. You don't know where I'm from or where I'm going."

All this was true... Gerlach hesitated, wanting trouble, yet disturbed by the other man's seeming calm. He had no gun in sight, and his rifle leaned against the wall. Still, you couldn't tell.

He snorted and sat down, showing his contempt for a man who would take an insult without fighting, yet he was uneasy.

Matt glanced up to meet Kitty's eyes. She turned her face deliberately, and he flushed. She thought him a coward.

He lingered over his coffee, wanting a word with her, and finally the others left. He looked up when the door closed behind them. "There's a dance at Rock Springs," he said suddenly. "Would you go with me?"

She hesitated, then stiffened a little. "I'd be afraid to," she said. "Somebody might call you a coward in front of people."

Scarcely were the words out when she was sorry she had said them. His face went white and she felt a queer little pang and half turned toward him. He got up slowly, his face very stiff. Then he walked to the door. There he turned. "You find it so easy to see a man die?" he asked, and the words were shocking in their tone and in the something that spoke from his eyes.

HE WENT out, and the door closed, and Hanna said, to his daughter, "I don't want you speakin' to men like that. Nor do I want you goin' dancin' with strangers. Just the same," he added, "I'd say that man was not afraid."

She thought about it and her father's words remained with her. She held them tenderly, for she wanted to believe in them, yet she had seen the stranger take a deliberate insult without a show of resentment. Men had killed for less. Of course, she had not wanted that. (How he could have shown resentment without its

leading to bloodshed she did not ask herself).

She was at the window when he rode out of town, and was turning away from it when the side door opened and a slender, narrow-faced man stood there. She felt a start of fear. This was not the first time she had seen Lee Dunn, and there was something about him that frightened her.

"Who was that?" he demanded. "That man who walked out?"

"I...I don't know," she said, and then was surprised to realize that it was the truth. She knew nothing about him, and she had seen him but twice.

Lee Dunn was a narrow, knife-like man with a bitter mouth that never smiled, but there was a certain arresting quality about him so that even when you knew who and what he was, you respected him. His manner was old-fashioned and courteous, but without graciousness. It was rumored that he had killed a dozen men... and he had killed two here at the Springs.

Kitty rode to the party in a buckboard with Fred Hitch. And she was dancing her third dance when she looked up and saw the stranger standing at the floor's edge. He wore a dark red shirt that was freshly laundered and a black string tie. There was a short jacket of buckskin, Mexican style, over the shirt. His black boots were freshly polished.

She saw Dutch Gerlach watching him, and was aware of worry that there would be trouble. Yet two dances passed, one of them with Dutch, whom she hated but could not avoid without one dance, and he did not come near her. Someone mentioned his name. Matt Ryan...she liked the sound.

Lee Dunn came into the room and paused near Gerlach. She thought she saw Dutch's lips move, but he did not turn his head. But that was silly... why would the foreman of the KY talk to a rustler?

When she looked again Matt Ryan was gone...and he had not even asked her for a dance.

Something seemed to have gone from the lights, and her feet lost

their quickness. Suddenly, she knew she wanted to go home....

MATT RYAN was riding fast. He had seen Dunn come into the room and turned at once and slipped out through the crowd. What was to be done had to be done fast, and he went at it.

The big bay was fast, and he held the pace well. An hour after leaving the dance Ryan swung the big horse into the KY ranchyard and got down from the horse. With only a glance at the darkened bunkhouse he crossed to the big house and went in.

He had not stopped to knock, and he startled the big Mexican woman who was dusting a table. "Where's Tom?" he demanded.

"You can't see him," the woman barred his way, her fat face growing hard, "he sick."

"I'll see him. Show me to him."

"I'll not! You stop or I'll—I!"

"Maria!" The voice was a husky roar. "Who's out there?"

Matt Ryan walked by her to the bedroom doorway. He stopped there, looking in at the old man.

Tom Hitch had been a giant. He was a shell now, bedridden and old, but with a flare of ancient fire in his eyes.

"You don't know me, Hitch," Ryan said, "but it's time you did. You're losin' cattle."

Before the old man could speak, Ryan broke in, talking swiftly. He told about forty head that had left the day before, in broad daylight. He told of other, smaller herds. He told of the rustlers' growing boldness, of Lee Dunn at the dance, of Indian Kelly riding down to Hanna's Stage Station.

"They wouldn't dare!" the old man's voice was heavy with scorn. "I learnt 'em manners!"

"And now you're a-bed," Matt Ryan said roughly. "And you've a fool and an outlaw for an adopted son, a gunman for a foreman."

Hitch was suddenly quiet. His shrewd old eyes studied Ryan. "What's in you, man? What d' you want?"

"You're down, Hitch. Maybe you'll get up, maybe not. But what hap-

pens to the country? What happens to law an' order when—"

Somebody moved behind him and he turned to see Fred Hitch standing there with Dutch Gerlach. Fred was frightened, but there was ugliness in the foreman's face.

"You invite this gent here?" Dutch asked thickly.

"No." Old Tom sat up a little. "Tell him to get out and stay out."

The old man hunched his pillow behind him. "He forced his way in here with some cock-an'-bull story about rustlin'."

Gerlach looked at Ryan and jerked his head toward the door. "You heard him. Get out!"

Matt Ryan walked to the door and went down the steps. Then swiftly he turned the corner and ran for his horse. A rifle shot slammed the darkness and knocked a chip from a tree trunk, but his turn had been sudden and unexpected. He hit the saddle running and the bay bounded like a rabbit and was gone into the darkness under the trees. A second and a third shot wasted themselves in the night.

How had they gotten on his trail so suddenly? They must have left the dance almost as soon as he had. And where was Kitty Hanna?

MILES FELL behind him, and the trail was abandoned for the side-hills and trees, and he worked his way across ridges and saddles, and found himself back at Pima Canyon with the sun coming up.

All was still below, and he watched for half an hour before going down. When he got there he packed his spare horse and rode out of the canyon, leaving his diggings. They were good and getting better, but no place for him now. There were too many marks of his presence.

Why had he gotten into this? It was no business of his. What if the lawless did come from the hills and the good times of the old KY were gone? Could he not ride on? He owned nothing here, he did not belong here. This was a problem for others, not himself. But was it?

Was not the problem of the law and of community peace the problem of all men? Could any safely abandon their right of choice to others? Might

not their own shiftlessness rob them of all they valued?

Bedding down in the high pines under the stars, Matt Ryan thought himself to sleep over that. He had taken a foolish step into the troubles of others. He would stay out. Old Tom did not want his help, nor did Kitty want his love.

Two days he rode the hills, for two days shifting camp each night. For two days he was irritable. It was none of his business, he kept telling himself. The old man had sent him packing, Kitty had turned him down. Nevertheless, he could not settle down. He rode back to Pima Canyon and looked around.

Their tracks were everywhere. They had found this place, and had without doubt come looking for him. So he was a hunted man now. It was good to know.

Yet he did not leave. Without reason for remaining, he remained.

And on the third day he rode to Hanna's Station. Kitty was not there, but her father was. Hanna looked at him carefully. "Maria huntin' you. Come in here ridin' a mule. Acted like she didn't aim to be seen. Left word you was to see her."

"All right," he said.

Hanna brought him coffee and a meal. "Ain't Kitty's grub," he said. "She's to town."

The older man sat down. Dutch Gerlach was in with two men, he told Ryan, hunting for him. Or maybe, he added, hunting Fred Hitch.

"Hitch?"

"He's gone. Dropped out of sight. Nobody knows why."

A rattle of horses' hoofs sounded and Matt Ryan came to his feet quickly. Outside were four men. Dutch Gerlach, two hands...and Lee Dunn.

Ryan turned sharply. He had left his horse in the trees and there was a chance it had not been seen. Stepping into the kitchen, he moved back to a door on his right. He opened it and stepped through. He was in Kitty's room.

There was a stamp of boots outside and a distant sound of voices, then a rattle of dishes.

What had happened? If Lee Dunn and Gerlach were together, then--

SUDDENLY, he was conscious of a presence. In the shadowed room he had seen nothing. Now his hand dropped to his gun and he started to turn.

"Don't shoot, Ryan. It's me. Hitch."

In a quick step Ryan was at the bedside. Fred Hitch lay in the bed, his face drawn and pale. His shoulder and arm were bandaged.

"It was them." He indicated the men outside. "Gerlach egged me into sellin' some of the KY cows for gamblin' money, said it would all be mine, anyway. Then he began sellin' some himself, dared me to tell the old man."

"Lee Dunn was in it with him, and I was scared. I went along, but I didn't like it. Then when you saw the old man they got worried. They couldn't find you, and they decided to kill the old man, then to take over. I wouldn't stand for it, and made a break. They shot me down, but I got to a horse. Kitty hid me here...she went after medicine."

"They'll wonder why she isn't here now," Ryan said, half-aloud. Then he looked down at the man on the bed. "What about Tom? Did they kill him?"

"Don't think so. They want me for a front...or him. Then they can loot the ranch safely. After that, other outfits."

Ryan stepped to the window. With luck he could make the trees without being seen. He put a hand on the window and slid it up.

"Ryan?"

"Yeah."

"I ain't much, but the old man was good to me. I wouldn't see no harm come to him. Tell him that, will you?"

"Sure."

He stepped out the window and walked swiftly into the woods. There he made the saddle and started for the KY. He had no plan, he had not even the right to plan. It was not his fight. He was a stranger and...but he kept riding.

It was past midnight when he found the KY. He had been lost for more than an hour, took a wrong trail in the bad light...there were no lights down below. He rode the big horse down through the trees

and stepped out of the saddle.

There were a dozen saddled horses near the corral. He could see the shine of the starlight on the saddles. He saw some of those horses when he drew closer, and he knew them. They were riders from Thumb Butte...so, then, they had the ranch. They had moved in.

And this ranch was the law. There were no other forces to stand against Gerlach and Dunn now. There were ten thousand head of cattle in the hills, all to be sold. It was wealth, and a community taken over.

He stood there in the darkness, his face grim, smelling the night smells, feeling the danger and tension, knowing he was a fool to stay, yet unable to run.

The old man might still be alive. If he could move in, speak to him once more...with just the shadow of authority he might draw good men around him and hold the line. He was nobody now, but with the authority of old Tom Hitch, then he could move.

He loosened his gun in his belt, and taking his rifle walked across the clearing to the back door. He saw a man come to the bunkhouse door and throw out a cigarette. The man started to turn, then stopped and looked his way. He kept on walking, his mouth dry, his heart pounding. The fellow watched him for a minute, barely visible in the gloom, and then went back inside.

MATT RYAN reached the back of the house and touched the latch. It lifted under his hand and he stepped in. Carefully, he eased across the room, into the hall. When he made the old man's room, he hesitated, then spoke softly. There was no reply.

He struck a match...it glowed, flared. Matt looked at the old man, who was slumped back against the headboard of his bed, his flannel nightshirt bloody, the eyes wide and staring. They had murdered Tom Hitch. Killed him without a chance.

Matt drew back, hearing a noise at the bunkhouse. The match died and he dropped it, rubbing it out with his toe.

A faint rustle behind him and he turned, gun in hand.

A big old form loomed in the dark, wide, shapeless. "It me... Maria. He say give you this." A paper rattled and he took it. "You go... quick now."

He went swiftly, hearing boots grating on the gravel. They were suspicious, and coming to look. He stepped out the back door and a man rounded the corner. "Hey, there!" the fellow started forward. "Wait...!"

Matt Ryan shot him. He held the gun low and he shot at the middle of the man's body, and heard the other man's gun's blast muffled by his body.

He started by him, and a light flared somewhere and its light caught the man's face. He had killed Indian Kelly.

Rifle in hand, he ran, ducking into the trees. There were shouts behind him, and he saw men scatter out, coming. He could see their darker shapes against the gray of the yard. He fired four fast shots from the hip, scattering them across the yard. A man stumbled and went down, then the others hit the dirt.

He ran for the bay, caught the bridle reins and stepped into the leather. "Let's get out of here!" he said, and the big red horse was moving... fast.

Day was graying when he neared Hanna's Station. He saw no horses around, so he rode boldly from the woods to the back door. In the gray of the light, he swung down and knocked.

Kitty opened the door. He stepped in, grim, unshaven. "Got some coffee?" he said. "And I want to see Fred."

"You... they killed him. Gerlach and Dunn. They found him."

"Your father?"

"He's hurt... they knocked him out."

He looked at her hungrily, anxious to feel her need of him. With his fingers he spread the paper Maria had given him.

Matt Ryan: Take over.

Tom Hitch

The signature was big and sprawled out, but a signature known

all over the Slumbering Hills.

So... there it was. The problem was his now. Looking back, he could remember the old man's eyes. Hitch had known that if he had shown the slightest willingness to listen to Ryan they would both have been killed. But now the battle had been tossed to him.

Kitty looked at him, waiting. "There it is, Matt. You're the boss of Slumbering Hills."

The boss... and a hunted man. His only supporters an old man with an aching head, and a girl.

One man alone... with a gun.

THEY WOULD be combing the hills for him. They would come back here. Kitty had been left alone but then they were in a hurry to find him and Tom Hitch was living. Now, it would be different.

"Saddle up," he said. "You and your Dad are riding. Ride to the ranches, get the men together."

"What about you?" Her eyes were very large. "Matt, what about you?"

"Me? I'll wait here."

"But they'll come here! They'll be looking for you."

"Uh-huh... so I show 'em who's boss." He grinned suddenly, boyishly. "Better rustle some help. They might not believe me."

When they had left, he waited. The stage station was silent, the throbbing heart gone from it. He poured coffee into a cup, remembering that it was up to him now... Suppose... suppose he could do it without a gun... A time had come for change, the old order was gone... but did Lee Dunn know that? And in his heart, Matt Ryan knew he did not. For Lee Dunn was the old order. He was a relic, a leftover, a memory of the days when Tom Hitch had come here, Hitch already past his prime, Dunn not yet to reach his...

In the silent house the clock ticked loudly. Matt Ryan sipped his coffee, and laid his Winchester on the table.

He checked his gun while the clock ticked off the measured seconds.

It was broad day now... Kitty and her father would be well into the valley. Would the ranchers come? His

was a new voice, they did not know him. They had only that slip of paper and the words, *Take over*.

He got up and walked to the window. And then he saw them coming.

HE PLACED his rifle by the door and stepped outside. There were ten of them...ten, and one of him. A fleeting smile touched his lips. Old Tom Hitch had stood off forty Apaches once...alone.

"Tom," he whispered, "if you can hear me...say a word where it matters."

He stepped to the edge of the porch, a tall man, honed down by sparse living and hard years, his wedge-shaped face unshaven, his eyes cool, waiting. It had been like this on the Neuces...only different.

They drew up, a line of men on horses. Lee Dunn and Gerlach at the center.

He saw no others, he thought of no others. These were the ones.

"Hello, Dunn."

The knife-like man studied him, his hands on the horn of his saddle.

"Dunn, I'm serving notice. Tom Hitch sent me a note. His orders were for me to take over."

"Think you can?"

"I can."

Lee Dunn waited...why he waited he could not have said. He had heard from Gerlach that this man was yellow. Looking at him, seeing him, he knew he was not. He knew another thing—this man was a gunfighter.

"Who are you, Ryan? Should I know you?"

"From the Neuces...maybe you heard of the Kenzie outfit."

Lee Dunn's lips thinned down. Of course...he should have known. It had been a feud...and at the last count there were five Kenzies and one Ryan left. And now there was still one Ryan...

"So this is the way it is," Matt said, making his plea. "The old days are over, Lee. You an' me, we're of the past. Old Tom was, too. He was a good man, and his guns kept the peace and made the law. But the old days of living by the gun are gone, Lee. We can admit it, or we can die."

"Where's the girl?" Gerlach demanded.

"Gone, with her father. They are in the Valley now rounding up all of Old Tom's supporters from the Slumberin' Hills."

His eyes held on them, seeing them both, knowing them both. "What's it to be, Dunn?"

A voice spoke behind him. "I did not go...Dad went. I'm here with a shotgun and I'm saying it's between Matt Ryan and the two, Gerlach and Dunn. I'll kill any man who lifts a gun other than them."

"Fair enough," it was a lean, hatchet-faced hand. "This I wanta see."

Lee Dunn sat very still, but he was smiling. "Why, Matt, I reckon mebbe you're right. But you know, Matt, I've heard a sight about you...never figured to meet you...an' I can't help wonderin', Matt—are you faster than me?"

He spoke and he drew and he died falling. He hit dust and he rolled over and he was dead, but he was trying to get up, and then he rolled over again, but he had his gun out. The gun fired and the bullet plowed a furrow and that was all.

Gerlach had not moved. His face was gray and seemed suddenly thinner. As though hypnotised he stared at the thin tendril of smoke from the muzzle of Ryan's .44 Colt.

Slowly, his tongue touched his dry lips, and he swallowed.

"You boys will be ridin' on," Ryan said quietly. "That rope you got there should be handy. There's a tree down the trail...unless you want to ride out with a yella-belly."

"Ain't honin' to," the hatchet-faced man said. He looked down at Lee. "He made his try, Ryan. Give him a send-off, will you?"

Matt nodded, and Kitty walked out and stood beside him, watching them ride away, gathered around Gerlach, who sat his horse as if stunned. Only now his hands were tied.

Matt Ryan looked down at Kitty, and he took her arm and said, "You know, you'll do to ride the river with, Kit. You're a girl to walk beside a man...wherever he goes."

"Come in," she said, but her eyes said more than that. "I've some coffee on."

●END

MEET YOU ON THE MISSOURI

by NOEL M. LOOMIS

STAND ON Times Square in New York City long enough or on Piccadilly Circus in London and you'll see someone you know, they say. But in 1800-1830 any trader, trapper, or explorer in the West might say to another, "Meet you on the Missouri."

Considering the fact that the Missouri was the longest river in the world, some persons might think that was a vague appointment, but according to reports of those who

traveled the Missouri at that time, you could meet almost anybody in the West somewhere on that river. Two trappers in St. Louis might be leaving in the early fall. One is going to Taos and the Gila to trap beaver; the other is headed for Ute country in Colorado. They part, and one says, "Meet you on the Missouri." The other nods. The tail of his coonskin cap swings, and he says, "Sure." And the amazing thing is that it was not at all unusual for them actually to meet somewhere on the Mighty Mo the following spring as they packed their valuable furs in canoes or bull-boats to float them down to St. Louis.

The people who met on the Missouri make up a list of the "greats" who opened up the West for the emigrants. They were the men who trapped beaver, followed rivers to their sources, and then found other rivers that led them down the western slopes to the Rockies.

Many of them left no written documents of their travels, for a good many of them could not write. However, the best and most significant reason for silence was that the location of good beaver streams was a top trade secret. Fur trading was a cutthroat business, and every man was out to beat everybody else! If some trapper found a gold mine of a beaver stream, certainly he wasn't going to draw a map to make it easy for the next trapper. He memorized the location and returned to it later himself.

Washington Irving, the American writer probably best known for

The West was plenty big, but it was whittled down to size by the man who dared to travel up the Missouri's three thousand miles of wild river through raw-red savage country . . .

his *Sketch Book*, wrote of his trip up the Missouri and the important people he met on the way. There was Mr. Hunt, who conducted the expedition, and with them were Mr. Nuttall, an Englishman who wrote a book on American plants, and another Englishman, Mr. Bradbury, who was to make a collection of American plants.

Then there was Manuel Lisa, who with his own expeditions made twelve trips up the Missouri. He was a well-known fur trader, who established the trading fort, Raymond, though it was better known as Manuel's Fort. Here in this fort was the first permanent building in what is now the state of Montana—a log cabin of two rooms and a loft.

We read about all these characters—Irrving, a writer, Daniel Boone, Boone, an explorer, Lisa, a fur trader, in a dissociated way, not linking them together in time or geography—and then suddenly find them—meeting on the Missouri.

Irving says that he met Daniel Boone, outstanding hero and fa-

vorite character in school-day history books, at Charette, an old village on the Missouri River. Boone had stayed on the borders of the wilderness leading a hunter's life. There are conflicting reports of Boone's age, but Irving states that he was eighty-five when they met him.

AT THAT time Boone had nearly sixty beaver skins from the trapping expedition he had just completed. He was erect, strong, and still possessed the old pioneer spirit, and Irving thought that Boone watched them leave for the upper Missouri with a feeling that he would like to go back with them to the Pacific.

Just that thing—returning from an expedition to see another one on its way up the Missouri—happened many times to trappers who aren't as famous as Daniel Boone, and most of them turned around and went back up. Their own love of the wilderness and adventure and danger, plus the pressure and persuasion of men who needed their knowledge of the distance ahead, took them back.

Such a man with much valuable experience was John Colter, who discovered Yellowstone Park or Colter's Hell.

Colter, shy, quiet, reserved, was truly a man of the wilderness. It made no difference to him whether he was alone exploring the unknown streams or in the company of one or more than one.

When he met the Hunt and Irving expedition, he had just come three thousand miles in thirty days from the headwaters of the Missouri in a small canoe.

Even after the gruelling pace, and able to relax from the dangers at the head of the Missouri and the dreaded Blackfeet Indians, he looked back with longing—even followed along with the expedition all morning, debating whether to go back or return home.

John Colter had travelled with Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition. He had been of valuable assistance to Manuel Lisa. He had

spent a winter with Dixon and Hancock, to trap beavers for immense profit. It is easier to understand Colter to note that when the three were in close confines of winter quarters, Colter started out into the strange surrounding territory for "something to do."

A great deal of legend has grown up around Colter and the things that he did and things that happened to him. These legends are good for those who like to listen to tall tales from those who loved to tell them.

There is reason enough for legends. There is no evidence that John Colter made any notes of his expeditions or drew any maps. None have been found. What information comes from him was told to others who fortunately wrote and kept notes.

Another reason for legends is that what is known of the true Colter—his meeting with the Indians, his escapes—is so incredible it is hardly believable.

There is a mysterious aspect of Colter's life. Men who talked to him told many stories about him, but very little about the Yellowstone discovery.

The winter of 1806-07 he spent with Dixon and Hancock, for instance: there is no report of that winter except that, becoming bored with the temporary shelter, he went up the canyon alone into Sunlight Basin.

In fall the trapper would find a beaver stream and trap day and night. Beavers were difficult to trap, and traps were expensive and hard to replace if they were not taken care of properly. The trapper carried around his neck a small bottle in a leather thong with castor to bait the traps. He stood in icy water up to his neck to set traps. He was dressed in buckskin suit, woolen blanket capote, fur cap, fur-lined mocassins and leggings, and, when these clothes wore out, there was the need to find friendly Indians to trade with the squaws for new clothes.

It was maintained that beaver

skins taken in middle winter were not as good as those of spring and fall, but maybe the pure ruggedness of wading into icy waters two or three times a day to unload or reset traps and then of hunting the rest of the day for food in clothes frozen stiff, was a little too much even for the trappers.

MANY JOINED up with friendly Indian bands for the heavy winter, or quartered near a woody bank of a stream which attracted game. But the trappers knew they wouldn't always find the Indians friendly. Indians on the warpath could be avoided, but too many times some young buck had to do something spectacular to keep in good standing with the tribe to prove his bravery or prowess, so he'd start out to see what he could find. And many times it was some lonely, hard-working trapper looking for a fortune in beaver who would lose his hair.

To the Indian it was a mark of accomplishment to stalk a lone man, kill him, and scalp him or mutilate him in some other way to boast about. But that was one of the hazards the trapper knew when he set out into the wilderness.

John Colter knew those dangers when he asked to be released from his stint with the Lewis and Clark expedition. He saw signs of plentiful beaver up there at the headwaters of the Missouri, and although it was in the dreaded Blackfoot country and they were especially ugly right then, since one of their numbers had been killed by Captain Lewis, Colter left the expedition at Fort Mandan and went on alone to trap.

He met a man by the name of Potts, also working alone. They agreed to go together. Knowing the hostility of the Blackfeet, they set their traps at night and took them up early in the morning, and stayed in hiding during the day.

They were ascending a small creek about six miles from Jefferson's Fork, a branch of the Missouri, when they heard a pounding of feet on the ground. The banks

of the creek were steeply perpendicular and they could not see, but Colter was sure of the sound and he gave the warning, "Indians!"

Potts disagreed. "Buffalo," he said.

Colter was for retreat, but again Potts disagreed. In a very short time it was too late. The pounding footsteps were five or six hundred Indians suddenly lining both banks, beckoning the two men to come ashore.

Colter headed the canoe to shore, and as they reached the bank, one of the Indians grabbed Potts' rifle. Colter, who was strong, took it away from him and gave it back to Potts. Potts quickly pushed the canoe away from shore.

One Indian, a little quick on the bow, let fly an arrow, and Potts was wounded. Colter saw what had happened and told Potts he was crazy to escape.

What Potts did then really sounded crazy. He pointed his gun at one of the Indians and shot him fatally. When the Indian arrows stopped flying, Potts looked like a porcupine, and he was also quite dead.

The Indians grabbed Colter and stripped him. Standing naked, he heard them arguing about the methods of torture they could use. Having been with the friendly Crows for some time, Colter had learned their language and enough Blackfeet to understand what they meant to do.

They had settled on setting him up for a target when the chief, who evidently wasn't in a target-shooting mood that day, stopped the argument and turned to Colter. He asked if he could run fast.

Colter got the picture quick. He would have to run for his life. It was just a chance, but for a strong man it was enough. He said solemnly that he was a very bad runner.

That did it. The chief told the party to wait and he led Colter about three or four hundred yards onto the prairie, left him, and went back to the party.

EVERY TRAPPER knew something the Blackfeet didn't know;

Colter could run—but fast. The big party of Indians let up a wild frenzy of yells and started after him. He had six miles to go across a prairie studded with prickly pear—with bare feet—to get to a stream.

He headed toward the Jefferson Fork at full speed, and was more than halfway there before he dared look behind him. What he saw gave him a little more hope. The Indians were spread out and some distance behind him, except one Indian who was close to him, carrying a spear.

The speed that Colter had exerted to put him so far ahead of the party of Indians was telling on him. Blood gushed from his nose and covered his face and chest. He was still about a mile from the river, and hearing the Indian close behind him, he cringed, waiting for the blow of the spear. Then he turned quickly and spread out his arms.

The Indian, probably shocked by the sudden halt and the dreadful appearance of Colter's naked body covered with blood, stopped too, stumbled, and in attempting to throw the spear at Colter, stuck it in the ground. Colter jerked the spear from the ground and pinned the Indian fatally in the dirt.

In almost the same movement, though almost fainting and exhausted, Colter ran for the sheltering cottonwood trees and the river. The Indians reached their dead companion and stopped to set up a yell.

Colter reached the river, plunged into it, and, with the luck he had certainly earned by now, saw that there was a small island against the upper point of which a drift of logs had lodged.

He swam under the drift and after several tries got his head above water under the drift and managed to settle himself without being seen. All day the Indians, who were enraged at his disappearance, screeched and yelled around him. They crossed the drift many times, Colter able to see them through the chinks, but they did not find him. The horrible thought

came to Colter that they might set the drift on fire. So until night he lived with this suspense—but it did not materialize.

By nightfall, the Indians went off in the other direction. It was quiet. Colter chanced coming out from under the raft and swam down river as quietly as possible.

He swam a long distance, came on shore, and travelled all night. It was a seemingly impossible escape that he had made, but his situation still was anything but good. He was completely naked, there was a burning sun, he was hungry but had no means of killing food, he had to cross a snowed-in pass in the mountains, his bare feet were filled with thorns from the prickly pear, and he was seven days from Lisa's fort.

Any but an American might have given up right then, but seven days later Colter arrived at the fort.

A tall tale? There have been many told about Colter, but this one was related by a man who knew Colter and had talked to him, and it was a story Colter himself had told. His appearance when he reached the fort substantiated the story, although it was a while before even the frontiersmen fully believed it.

MORE STORIES as incredible about Colter might be read if Colter had kept a journal. We might also know more detail of his crossing what today is Yellowstone Park if there were more evidence than what he said to others.

The Indians knew about Yellowstone and its geysers and hot springs, but they avoided it because of fear and superstition. When Colter came upon it, it probably was not with superstition but with wonder and awe. He crossed this territory on a mission he made at the request of Manuel Lisa, who wanted him to go to the Indian tribes in their winter quarters and tell them that Manuel's Fort was open for trading.

Colter's exploits and adventures are pieced together from written

accounts of other men. And by another way that was unique to Colter. Though he may not have kept any kind of journal, he had a habit of doodling that has turned up some tantalizing evidence of his journeys and whereabouts.

In the museum of the Grand Teton National Park there is a rock crudely shaped as a human head. On one side is scratched the name, "John Colter," and on the other, the date, 1808. Exhaustive study has been made to prove its authenticity as a sculpture done by Colter, and it is now considered his handiwork. Since it was found in a secluded spot in the foothills of the west slope of the Teton Range, it is thought that Colter had sought shelter from a storm or a band of Indians. And in the course of things he found this rock and chipped away at it for something to do.

Another time, for what reason no one can know, Colter slashed a large piece of bark from a pine tree and initialed the bare place with a large J C under an X. It was found later and under expert study judged to be about eighty years old. The pine was cut, to be placed in a park museum, but for some reason the part with his initials was misplaced and never reached the museum.

These famous men—Colter, Irving, Boone, Lisa and many others—roamed the West, but always seemed to run across one another somewhere on the Missouri. It was a huge country, but it was whittled down to size by men who traveled up three thousand miles of wild river in savage country as unconcernedly as some persons walk around New York's Times Square.

● END

BUT ONE MAN ALONE MIGHT....

(cont'd from page 21)

sheriff, of the others Clade had slain, of Ella, to whom he could return now unharmed....

JUST AFTER daybreak, Pedro Perez saw Lanwell emerge from Mad

Dog Canyon, leading his pony, with Wolf Clade in the saddle, weak from loss of blood and from the pistol-whipping he had received. The outlaw was lashed there, his ankles tied beneath the pony's belly and his wrists manacled behind his back.

"Your trick did it, Pedro," Lanwell told the Mexican, as he stopped the pony. "Stand back! I realize how you're feelin', rememberin' your daughter. But we'll let the law handle Wolf Clade. You'll get to see him hang. I couldn't locate his horse anywhere. So you hit for town on your own pony and tell the marshal, and have him come with a couple of men, and bring an extra mount. And spread the word in town, so Ella will hear and take comfort..." ●END

THE TROUBLED GUN

(cont'd from page 47)

tically pressing fingers. Holbrook took one tottering step forward, mouth still working, and then his knees gave and he pitched forward on his face. He did not stir.

Cameron turned slowly and looked at Lucy. She stood there as stiff and unmoving as a statue. Cameron's .44 was still in her hand. A tiny trickle of black gunpowder smoke was curling out of the barrel....

Afterward, she told Cameron, "I thought once that I loved him. If I hadn't, I never would have married him. But I can't seem to remember loving him any more. If I ever did, then it died in me all at once. Is it awful of me, Steve? I can't shed a single tear. I killed him yet I don't know a bit of regret. Is that awful of me?"

"Let's not talk about it, Lucy," he said gently. "Let's begin to forget. There should be enough for us in the future to make us never think about the past."

"That's right," she agreed. "We do have a lifetime together ahead of us, haven't we?..." ●END

THE KILLING AT SPANISH LICK

by ED ASHLEY

Vern Sanders? He wasn't a man, he was a gun

I SAW THE killing that day, through the window of the Crazy-Horse Saloon. I never want to see anything like that again. I guess most of the folks in town felt the same way, though a killing was just what a lot of people were waiting all morning to see, from the time word got around that Vern Sanders was back in town. Everyone knew that, sooner or later, the marshal would come after him. Jed was that kind of marshal.

Vern Sanders, at thirty-four, had the reputation of being the fastest gunman in all of Colorado, Wyoming and Utah. Fourteen men had died before Vern's gun, some of them well-known gunslingers, and any one of them as fast or faster than the marshal of Spanish Lick. And still, if you had wanted to bet a nickel against the marshal's coming after Vern, you couldn't have found a taker anywhere in town.

Jed didn't stand a chance with Vern Sanders in a showdown, but we all knew he wouldn't try it any other way. Besides, he couldn't have gotten any deputies if he had tried. Not to go against Vern. That was why I closed the store and started over to the Crazy-Horse to try to talk to Vern. At the time, I had an idea I might get him out of town before it happened. Then too, I was curious to see how he looked after fifteen years and fourteen killings. Vern and I had gone to school together, right here in Spanish Lick. I guess I was just about the only real friend Vern ever had in this town.

He never had gotten along with people any too well. Even his father, a big, rugged man, had resented Vern,

the skinny little dreamer. A skinny kid has a mighty rough time of it in a town like Spanish Lick. As I went down the board sidewalk toward the saloon, I remembered that I was the one who had bought Vern his first gun, a single-action Colt .44 with an eight-inch barrel.

I was nineteen then, and clerking in the store for old man Bartow. Vern had just turned seventeen, and he was afraid old Bartow wouldn't sell him the gun. He'd been saving the money for six months, and he was

pretty anxious. So I bought the gun for him, and a box of shells, and I met him that afternoon down in the dry-wash back of town and gave it to him. Ever see a good jeweler take a 21-jewel works out of the case? That's the way Vern Sanders handled that new gun of his, balancing it in his thin

hands, easy and light as a feather, turning it slowly, smiling all the time like a man who has just realized his life-long dream. Vern was always small for his age. I guess he figured that gun would make up for it some day. It surely did.

Lots of times after that Vern and I would ride up the dry-wash into the foothills and do some shooting. I can remember the way the blisters came on Vern's hands; on the palm of the right hand where it slapped the butt of the Colt's, and one on each of the middle fingers. And the raw, red place on the edge of his left palm where he'd fan the hammer. Most kids would have fooled around with several styles of drawing, trying to find which was the fastest. Vern never did that. Right from the first, he fanned his gun at waist level, and he never changed. By the time those



blisters changed to calluses, I couldn't offer him any competition at all.

"I don't think I was scared much, going into the Crazy-Horse. Just the same, I didn't swing those doors very fast or sudden. You don't startle men like Vern Sanders if you can help it.

Coming in out of the sur I didn't see him for a moment. Then I heard the voice that I remembered after fifteen years.

"Harley Ferris," he said, not very loudly, and I saw him then, sitting over in the corner by the window. If it hadn't been for the voice, I don't believe I would have recognized Vern, he looked that old. And tired; I never saw anyone look so tired. His body was as hard and lean as ever, but his face looked sixty years old. The dust and sweat had gathered in the little creases around his eyes, and the skin over his cheek-bones was too tight, too shiny. There was an irregular grey crust, like alkali, around the band of his hat. His faded shirt was sweat-stained. He looked casual and relaxed, but I knew it wasn't by chance that he could watch both doors and the street from where he sat.

"Hello, Vern." My own voice sounded too loud in my ears. The place was empty except for myself, Vern, and the bartender who looked just then as though he would have been happier somewhere else.

VERN ASKED me to sit down, but when I pulled a chair up to his table he said in a tired, patient way, "Not there, Harley," and I realized I'd put myself between Vern and the front door. I moved.

I wanted to come out with it right away. I wanted to say: Don't kill him Vern, don't kill the old man, just get back on your horse and ride out of Spanish Lick and everything will be all right. But I didn't say it.

"It's been a long time, Vern. How are you?" He smiled his twisted smile, and for a moment he was the same quiet, intense kid who used to ride with me up the dry-wash, with his new gun gently bumping the saddle, and his alert eyes watching for

the movement of an unlucky jackrabbit in the brush. His eyes were alert now, all right, but not for any jack-rabbits.

"I'm still alive." The way he said it, it wasn't a joke. Not a joke at all.

He didn't talk about himself. He didn't have to. Things like that get around. He asked me about old Bartow, and I told him how Bartow had died and I was running the store now, and I told him about the livery-stable fire and a lot of other little things that had happened around town. Vern seemed interested, but I got the feeling that he was waiting. He knew why I was there, and he was waiting for me to get to it. So, finally, I got to it.

"Jed is fifty-eight," I said. "He's not as fast as he used to be."

"I know how old Jed is." His face was a mask. There was no emotion whatever in his voice. I waited.

"You could pull out. You don't have to wait for him." Vern Sanders pushed his dusty hat to the back of his head, and wiped the sweat from his temples. He gave a slow sigh, as though he had come to the end of a long, hard journey.

"I'm going to stay in Spanish Lick, Harley. I rode all the way up from the San Juans, riding nights, circling towns. I'm home. I'm sick of riding. I'm going to stay in Spanish Lick as long as I live."

I didn't know what to say. We sat for quite a while in silence. It was Vern who spoke first.

"Let me tell you how it is with me. Do you want to know where I've been for the last year, Harley? Where I've been for a whole, stinking, miserable year? Living in a lean-to in the San Juan mountains, like a damned gopher! The one time I rode into town I had to kill a man. Only he wasn't a man. He was a kid. A sniveling kid with a fancy belt and a nickel-plated pistol, trying to collect a reward. Trying to be a big man."

Vern sneered. Deliberately, easily, he drew his gun, spun it in his hand, and laid it on the table with the butt toward me, so lightly it hardly made a sound. I stared.

"Yeah, same gun," Vern said. "I

wish old man Bartow had never sold it." His voice took on a hard edge. "I wish I'd never seen a .44 in my life."

The bluing was worn from the sides of the barrel and the cylinder now, and there were little scratches around the loading gate. The old cherrywood butt was polished from contact with Vern's hand.

"Go ahead. Pick it up." I felt a funny kind of pride, because I knew I was the only man on earth to whom Vern would have made such a gesture. I helfted the gun. In Vern's hand it had seemed so light, so much a part of him, that I was surprised for a moment at the weight of it. Vern looked at me with a crooked smile.

"There's a big reward, Harley," he said softly.

I looked up from the gun into Vern's eyes, pale and steady, and I thought about that night of the first killing, when Vern had come to me like the scared kid he was, and I'd given him my saddle-bags, and sneaked down to Bartow's and filled them with grub for him. It had happened along toward twilight. Vern was walking down Main Street, wearing his gun. The miner was half drunk, and he made some crack about a little boy with a big gun, and then he saw Vern's face.

The miner drew fast, there were two witnesses to that, but he never had a chance. Then when Vern saw him dead on the street, he came to me. I remember I tried to get him to stay and face it. "I know my father better than you do," he had said, and then "Goodbye, Harley," and his horse kicked dust in my face and he was gone, into the hills, into Cheyenne, and Laramie, and Salt Lake; into a string of towns and a string of gunfights.

Now he was back.

I LAID THE gun back on the table. Vern picked it up, and once again it was weightless. It slid smoothly into the worn holster on his thigh. He rolled a cigarette and scratched a sulphur match under the table. The smoke burned my nose. Like powdersmoke.

I saw Vern's eyes narrow, and then I heard the footsteps too. But it was only a boy, the kid who worked around the marshal's office. He stood just inside the swinging door, scuffling his feet. He was a skinny kid, and his overalls were a size too big.

"You—Vern Sanders?" he stammered.

"Yeah," said Vern, wearily. "I reckon I am."

The boy came closer, slowly, awed by the presence of the great Vern Sanders, the man whose reflexes were a fifth of a second faster than other men's.

"The marshal—he says t' tell you—he says he's comin' t' git you!" the boy blurted. He started to back toward the door, but as he turned to go, Vern stopped him with a word.

"You," he said, not loud, but the kid stopped in his tracks and his knees began to shake. "You're not to watch this, understand?"

"Y-yessir."

"Go tell the marshal I'm waiting, and then go home. You're not to watch." Vern's voice was savage. The boy backed out the door and ran.

We watched him go up the street and into Jed's office. He came out after a bit and disappeared around a corner. Vern sighed.

"He'll watch. They all watch."

I didn't say anything.

The door of Jed's office opened and he came out, a worn old man, doing his job. I watched Vern's face, but there was nothing there.

He stood up stiffly. He caressed his gun-butt with a slim hand, like a lover touching a woman's cheek. He lifted the gun an inch and let it slide down again.

I couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Vern, you don't have to kill him." My throat was dry; my words tumbled over each other. "Don't do it. There's still time. Go out the side door. I'll bring your horse around. For Judas' sake, don't do it."

He gave me his crooked smile.

"He's a big man," Vern said. "He may kill me."

He stopped for a moment at the door.

(please turn to page 69)

FURY

by L. D. Geumlek

A man had to die sometime and hanging was a small price to pay for ridding the country of Will Staley.

AUGUST WAS hot as the hinges.

Sam had spent three days packing salt. He left the ranch at daylight and returned after sundown. With the thermometer at the high nineties in the thin mountain air, men and animals stayed out of the noon sun if they could. The first salt went to the more distant range, but on August 6 there was only one pack load to go, and that not far off.

Sam took longer than usual at breakfast, then cleaned the kitchen. When Jane, his wife, was alive, the kitchen had been her pride, and Sam tried to keep it the way she would have wished, but when he got busy, things piled up.

The sun had reached the quarter mark of mid-sky when Sam closed the kitchen door behind him. He was a square, stocky man, fifty years old, but he had looked the same age since he was thirty. The wind-burned lines on his cheeks had merely deepened, and his shaggy eyebrows had grown dusty gray above his blue eyes. He felt no different physically, but there was a loneliness—he had always been a quiet, methodical man, but he felt the weight of days of utter silence.

He saddled his bay gelding and loaded the cubes of stock salt on the dun pack mare. Lending her, he started across the bench until he came to the Cut and saw that the fence was broken. That could not be passed without an investigation.

Sam and Jane had bought the ranch twenty years ago. It hadn't been much of a place, but they had set doggedly about building it up. First they had put their house, square and solid, on the bench above the river. They had chosen the site because Jane loved the view of the valley, and because spring-fed Deer Creek was handy. The one drawback was its nearness to the Cut.

The ground dropped away from the bench in a long smooth sweep, except that on the south it was as if the earth's crust had been split. The head of the Cut was narrow and deep, the sides of red and gray strata were broken only by small ledges for nearly a hundred feet straight down. As the Cut widened, however, the sides were eroded and slanted, until at the mouth it was only a brush-choked gully. Sam had fenced the Cut before he'd brought even one head of beef on the place.

Swinging out of the saddle and dropping the reins, he looked at the rail fence briefly. The logs were old and rotting, but they had been splintered with vi-



Never having felt spurs before, Calico had thrown the rider.

olence. There had been a slide and the lip of the Cut was crumbled. Testing the solidity of the ground as he went, he waded gingerly to the edge and peered over the sheer side.

Calico, Jane's old pinto, was lying at the bottom of the Cut. He was not dead. Sam could see his heaving ribs, and one front hoof thrashed out suddenly and jerkily. There was a rope hackamore on the horse.

Sam inched back to safer ground, then hurled himself into his saddle. With one movement, he turned the pack mare loose and sent the gelding racing toward the house.

He snatched his rifle off the rack, made sure it was loaded, then sped down the hill into the mouth of the cut. The gelding pounded through the brush and Sam did not notice the whipping branches or tearing thorns.



IN A MATTER of minutes, they reached the narrow box canyon where the pinto lay. A look at the sunken eyes and foam flecked mouth was enough. Sam sent a mercy shot into Calico's head.

Then he began his search.

The pinto had a broken back, but he had been lying in the Cut alive and suffering for a long time. At least two days, Sam figured. The streaks along his side were undeniably spur marks.

Sam looked carefully. Whoever had tied the rope hackamore around Calico's neck had not fallen with the horse. There was no trace of him among the rocks.

The sun came late to the Cut, but now it was reflected from the wall. It was hot already. Yesterday and the day before it must have been a small and stifling hell.

Sam rode around and up again to the broken fence. There had been no strong wind in the past two days and the story was written in the sunbaked dust.

There were the deep hoofprints just be-

yond the shattered rails. Coupled with the spur marks, they told that Calico, never having felt spurs before, had been driven to terrified fighting. He had thrown the rider—there were the marks, even a hand-print plowing along the gravelly dirt—and gone crashing through the fence. The ground had given way. His toss had saved the rider's life, but Sam would take care of that.

He gave one bleak glance at the pack mare. She was plodding back to the corral. Let her go—she'd be all right for a while.

He followed the footprints. He had to dismount several times to study them but the trail was never lost for long. It was easier because he'd known from the beginning where it would lead.

The man had walked straight and uninjured. There was no reason why he couldn't have come back to put the pinto out of its agony.

"He should have come back," Sam said aloud in a terrible anger. "He should have come back. He should have come back."

It was Jane's pet that had lain there in the heat—

Sam did not travel fast, now. He had to make sure he was following the right track, even though he knew. And there was no hurry. The pinto was no longer suffering. Will Staley would be dead a long time. There was no hurry.

Staley must have heard that the owner of a dude ranch near Dillon was offering a good price for Calico. The gentle old horse could be trusted not to harm the valuable skins of important dudes who came West to play cowboy and Indian. Sam had refused to sell. He liked to see the pinto around the corrals, or eating his head off in the best pastures. Calico had wandered from corral to range as he pleased, thinking he owned the ranch. After all, he had been there almost as long as Sam.

Calico had never been a really useful horse, but Jane had loved him. She'd raised him from a colt, and in a way, let him take the place of the child she'd always wanted.

Will Staley had been a burden to Sam since the day six years before when he had halted a rickety spring wagon in front of the abandoned claim shack below the Barge ranch and turned his sorry family out to live off the country. Jane's heart had been touched by Bert, the hungry two-year-old, so she carried food and blankets down to them. A month later, she helped Molly Staley at the birth of baby John. She felt that John was partly her child after that, she said.

Jane had died the next year. In a kind of memorial to her, Sam accepted the responsibility of Molly and the two boys. He knew Will Staley was robbing him, but as long as it was only a beef steer now and then, he overlooked it because it helped feed Molly and the young one, even though Will drank up most of the money.

Sam had been patient, but at last Will Staley had gone too far.

THE TWO little boys were outside the Staley cabin when Sam got there. Bert

was eight years old now, and John was six. Bert was carrying a battered tin dishpan filled with long green weeds. Sam knew them as pigweeds and the time to eat them was in early spring when they were young and tender.

"Your dad home?" he asked.

"He ain't been home for two days," Bert said.

"He's drunk," John added.

The two boys were dressed alike in overalls too old to hold the patches their mother had tried to sew. Their scabbed and chapped feet had gone bare so long the hot stony ground did not bother them. Insteps and ankles were scaled with dirt.

The slick-haired black dog following them slunk back from Sam, tail between its legs. Sam despised the dog. It was like Will, sneaking, cowardly, but ready to bite a friendly hand. There was an excuse for the dog, however. Living around Will Staley, it had been beaten and kicked too often.

Molly Staley came to the open unscreened door of the cabin.

"Howdy, Sam." She nodded without smiling as she took the pan of weeds and put it on the kitchen table. Her dark hair hung in dull strings around her tired sallow face. Her cheeks were sunken in a way that told of broken teeth. A faded gray dress covered her lank flat-breasted figure.

"I'm looking for Will."

"He ain't here, Sam," Molly began to pick the leaves off the pigweeds and put them in a kettle. "He ought to be back tonight." It seemed to Sam that her bony shoulders flinched at Will's name. He'd be doing her a favor, killing Will. Molly explained the pigweeds, "Garden wasn't no good this year. Too dry. Will said he'd get—bring some meat tonight."

"Meat, meat, meat—" The boys smacked their lips loudly, showing off. "Meat, meat, meat." Molly slapped at them without touching them. They became quiet.

The boys had peeling, sunburned cheeks, but there were circles under their eyes. Their potbellies reminded Sam of starved calves and he was ashamed. When Jane was alive, the children never got so hungry. She saw to that.

But now Jane was dead. Even her paint horse was dead.

"You think he's in town?" Sam asked.

"He's lookin' fer work. He'll be back tonight if he don't find none." Molly looked at the rifle cradled along Sam's arm, but she did not mention it.

"Back tonight," Sam repeated.

He could wait. It was just as well, after all. He'd be sorry later if he killed the man in front of the boys. It wasn't the kind of thing a kid should see.

He rode back up the hill.

In his house, he filled a flour sack with groceries. He did not have to think about taking care of Molly and the boys—it was one of the facts that were there, plain and accepted. He had been neglectful lately, but he'd do better. Maybe he ought to write it down so that if anything happened to him—like Will shooting first—the ranch would belong to Molly. He looked for a pen-

cil and paper, then changed his mind. Better wait until Will was dead to make sure he wouldn't profit. Sam could talk to his lawyer about it when he was arrested—



FOR THE first time it occurred to Sam how he might kill Staley without answering to the law. There would be no question if Will was shot while stealing cattle. And it was a sure thing that as soon as Will got home and sobered up, he'd come after meat.

Sam left the sack of food on the kitchen table. The kids would have to live on weeds a few days longer, but he'd make it up to them later.

Instead of taking salt out to the range, he scattered it in a grove of aspen near the lower boundary of the ranch. It was far enough from the house that Staley would feel safe to rustle, yet Sam could stay hidden in the trees to stand guard. Staley would not travel far if he could get what he wanted close to home. There were cattle on the other side of the hill that could be brought in to bait the trap.

Sam went after the steers as soon as he had buried Calico in a natural crevice further down the Cut. With any other horse, it might not have mattered, but Jane would have been sad if her pet—her child—had been left to bloat and stink in the sun.

Sam waited that night, not really expecting Staley so soon, but he was puzzled when the man didn't show up the second night or the third. Will wasn't one to live on pigweeds. It might be that, frightened by the accident to the pinto, he had fled the country.

It wouldn't do him any good. He couldn't go far enough to escape.

Sam rode back to the Staley cabin, taking the sack of food with him this time. He knew Will had been home as soon as he saw Molly's face. Her lip was cut and one eye had been blackened, although the bruise was beginning to fade to an ugly green.

The two boys put the flour sack on the packed-earth floor and dug in it like little animals. The cans rattled against each other as they were tossed aside until the

boys found the raisins. They tore open the box and stuffed their mouths.

Molly's swollen lips worked a silent moment before she spoke. "Sam, Will ain't home. He left last night. Goin' hunting, he said. The horse come home without him. That was yesterday evenin'. I'm mighty feared something happened to him."

"Which way did the horse come from?"

Molly looked at the ground. "Up your way. I guess he was goin' to hunt in them hills back of your house." She knew as well as he did that the only hunting Staley ever did was among Sam's cattle.

Sam turned away. "I'll look for him."

The boy Bert raised his head. "The dog didn't come home neither."

SAM SAW the dog haunched near the rim of the canyon. It was the first time he remembered that he hadn't repaired the broken fence.

Drag-reining his horse, Sam made his cautious way to the Cut. Will Staley was a twisted heap on a ledge more than halfway down. Probably, Sam decided, he'd fallen out of the saddle, staggered blind drunk toward home, and gone over the cliff. A wizened little man, he looked smaller than ever lying down there. Black patches of flies swarmed over his hook-nosed face.

It was justice. Sam hoped that Will, falling, had thought of Calico.

It would be a job getting the body off the ledge. Sam would have to get help from town.

Staley groaned and the black flies rose, then settled again.

He was alive!

Sam squatted on his heels, considering what to do. There was no hurry. If Will was going to die because Sam took a few minutes extra to think, there was still no hurry.

There wasn't time to ride to town, that was certain. It would take a full day. You couldn't leave a live man to fry on the

ledge that long.

Sam tried the fence posts. They shook under his hand and splintered when he kicked them. Too old, too rotten. They'd bear no weight.

Back in the saddle, he anchored his hope securely to the saddle horn. Making a throw, as if at a calf, he tossed the loop over the cliff. He climbed out of the saddle and tested the cinch. He examined the knot on the horn again. From now on, his life would depend on his horse and rope.

Hand over hand, with his feet getting what purchase they could on the red stone wall, he went down the rope. Once, as he crossed an overhang, his feet swung clear. His hands cramped as his weight jerked the rope around them. His palms were on fire.

He reached the ledge. There was a little space for him to stand but there was no way to get off except another sheer drop to a second ledge. Below that, he could climb down if the rock held solid enough.

He dangled the end of the rope over the side to measure its length. It reached the second ledge with some to spare—about fifteen feet, which he cut off.

As near as he could tell, Staley had a broken arm and leg and his head was bleeding. His spine seemed to be all right.

He hoisted Staley to ride pig-back and wrapped the piece of rope twice around their bodies, lashing Staley's unbroken arm across his own shoulder.

They started down again. Staley's shallow snuffing breath was in Sam's ears and the flies that had been drawn by the blood now buzzed and crawled across Sam's face, and he could not spare a hand to brush them away. The smell of stale liquor and sick breath and blood was thick as a mist in his nostrils. The unconscious man hadn't thought of it. Now he did.

(cont'd on next page)

THE KILLING AT SPANISH LICK

(cont'd from page 65)

"Goodbye, Harley." Just like that other time. I couldn't say a word.

I didn't want to see it, but in the end I couldn't help myself. I swung my chair around and saw it all. The big man with the drooping grey mustache, walking toward little Vern—deadly little Vern. The town was quiet, waiting to see its marshal die. They stopped, Jed and Vern, about ten yards apart. I couldn't hear what they said. I guess it doesn't matter much. Then, as I knew he would, old Jed started his draw.

I won't say you couldn't see Vern's draw, but his gun was out and level before Jed ever cleared his holster. But even from across the street, I

could see there was a good three inches of space between his left palm and the hammer of his gun when he fanned it. He would almost have had time to try again before Jed could get a shot off, but he didn't. Jed's bullet smashed through his rib-cage into the lungs, and little, tired Vern spun and twisted and fell halfway off the sidewalk, into the dust. He didn't drop the gun.

Yes, I saw the killing all right. And I saw Jed Sanders standing there kind of dazed, with his gun still hot in his hand, looking down at the corpse of his son. Like I said, I never want to see anything like that again. ●END

THE NEXT twenty feet were three times harder than the forty feet when he was alone.

His right foot searched the wall for a toehold, found one, then lost it as the rock broke under his foot. The sudden jolt made Staley's body jerk back, and Sam gagged as the rope cut into his chest. His forearm burned and stung where the skin had been scraped. He pressed against the hot wall, but Staley's weight sagged, trying to pull him toward space. The rope moved in his hand and he knew his horse had taken a step. Or else the cinch was loosening—or the knot he had tied—He remembered the black dog—a trouble maker—

Sam pressed harder against the wall until a spur of stone made a pain in his rib. He resumed his downward journey.

His arms were tearing from their sockets. He was fifty years old. He had never stopped to realize that fifty isn't thirty. He hadn't thought of it. Now he did.

His hat was knocked off the sun was a sledgehammer on his head, but the sweat that had smarted across his forehead began to dry, and that was a relief.

He paused only a minute on the second ledge. The sooner he got down, the sooner he could get rid of his burden.

Rubble and broken slide rock made a traversable slope along the wall from this

shelf. Going crablike across the narrow places, on hands and knees where he could, Sam reached the bottom of the canyon.

When the rope that bound Staley to him had been cut, Sam lay down, trembling with fatigue. His arms were heavy lumps of pain.

In a little while, he got up. He found his hat caught in a thorny bush, then he hunted dry branches and stepped on them to break them into the right lengths. Using the rope end and his neckerchief, he made crude splints for Staley's arm and leg.

He plodded down the Cut and back up the hill to where his saddle horse was waiting. He rode to Deer Creek for a drink before he went back to Will. There was no hurry. Will had lived this long, he'd live longer. If he didn't, why, he didn't, that was all.

The strain on Sam's arms made it hard for him to life Staley face down across the saddle, but he managed. He walked and led the horse to the ranch house.

Sam put Staley on the bed and washed him carefully. He tore strips from a sheet that had been Jane's, and bound up Staley's head. He laid the arm and leg out straight, cut the torn clothing away and put on better splints.

Then it was safe to go for a doctor. He would go past the cabin and send Molly and the kids up here to stay until Will could be moved. They would have enough to eat, and that was something.

Sam stopped in the kitchen for another drink of water. The water bucket was half full and the water was lukewarm. Carrying the tin dipper, Sam went to the creek for a fresh drink. The black dog followed, belly dragging, at a distance, then lapped frantically at the creek water.

Sam went back to the kitchen and found a half dozen cold biscuits which he threw outside for the dog. He did not look at the injured man again.

He watered the gelding, too. While he waited, he thought wearily of how a man had to do things.... You go to kill this dirty son. Instead, you almost die trying to save him, knowing all the time he isn't worth it. You take him into your home, give him your bed and your food. You take care of him and nurse him back to health. You look after his family. His dog.

And when he is strong and well and can stand up to face you, man to man—then you want to kill him again.... ●END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1907, AND JULY 2, 1910 (Title 22, United States Code Section 241) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF

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ABRAHAM GOODMAN

(Signature of business manager)

Subscribed and subscribed before me this 14th day of September, 1933. (My commission expires March 30, 1934.)

TESS HARWOOD (GOLDBERG)
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THE SHERIFF TRIES TWIN SIXES

by JOHNNY LAWSON

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"SO YUH SEE, gents," drawled Burlap Bates, perched on the top rail of the Crescent Bar corral fence, "the hand is quicker than the eye."

He grinned slightly as he pulled the ace of clubs from Cactus Hardin's weatherbeaten neck. The group of cow-

**WESTERN
CLASSIC**



Burlap Bates was heading for the Crystal-gazer's Studio.

pokes about him hoorawed. They got a kick out of Burlap's card tricks, but the Crescent Bar owner didn't. More than once, Burlap had been warned to quit fooling around and get to work. Burlap just grinned, and took his time. He had a yen to eventually become Sheriff Bill Stowe's

deputy, help the latter run down the recent daring holdups. But he kept pretty quiet about that. Nobody ever took Burlap Bates seriously.

"Now here's another one," the lean puncher continued, shuffling his deck. "Knowned as the 'Wayward Kings.' Yuh just pick any card an'—"

The holdup wasn't Sheriff Bill Stowe's only trouble, but it was the only law-job he could handle with guns!

It was then that baldish little Curly Blair waddled up. "Guess who's in town, boys!" he panted. "A crystal-gazer! Five-foot three, blonde. Blue eyes, an' lips like cherries. Boy! Is she a looker!"

The punchers piled off the rail fence as if induced by a scythe. Shorty Dixon, big and whiskered like a chaparral thicket, straightened his tie, slicked down his unruly black mop of hair.

"Mebbe she could larn me a few things at that," he admitted warmly. "Let's go."

They proceeded to saddle up their broncs.

"What's a crystal-gazer?" asked Burlap, still on the fence. He was fingering the card deck in his broad palms.

FRED TROWBRIDGE grinned over his sorrel mare. Fred was handsome as all get-out, a sure-fire trick with the women. So he thought.

"Fortune-teller, yuh dumb galoot," Fred grunted. "Ain't you never going to learn nothin'? Fork that cayuse and follow us."

Burlap sighed and pocketed his deck. Soon he was mounted and dusting over the stubble after the galloping Crescent Bar boys.

In Piute town, some five odd miles to the north, they thundered down the main street, whooping to high heaven, and shooting their guns into the air. Citizens on the boardwalks dove for cover, and the storeowners removed valuable articles from the windows, cursing roundly.

"Them polecats!" groaned liveryman Shultz, quieting his bucking horses with difficulty. "Blow the lid off the dan town with their hellin'."

His wife, knitting quietly in her rocker, nodded. "Boys will be boys. That Bates lad, now, he seems a nice sort. Not as rambunctious as the rest. I hear he wants to be a deputy."

The liveryman snorted. "Deppity—huh! Burlap couldn't catch a cold. Slower'n molasses. Stowe'd never want him draggin' around his office."

The Crescent Bar men dismounted before Tad Geshault's Saloon. By craning their necks, they could make

out the large sign below the second story window.

"Princess Zaza," the big letters announced, "palm-reading and crystal gazing. Why consider the price, with the past and the future at stake? All readings guaranteed accurate. Hours —9 AM to 9 PM."

"Curly says she charges five bucks a visit," murmured Cactus Hardin.

"Phew!" whistled Shorty Dixon. "There goes that silk shirt I was gonna get me. But if she's as good as yuh say, Curly—"

Curly Blair was looking like a moonstruck calf. "Them lips, them eyes, thet figger—"

"What in hell we waitin' for?" jerked Ted Trowbridge. He was the first to mount the rickety back stairs.

Burlap trailed in with the rest, embarrassed. Women made him blush to the core, especially the pretty ones. And he could see at first glance that the scantily-clad young woman seated in the heavily curtained room wasn't hard to look at. Gingerly, Burlap removed his hat, fingering the brim nervously.

Princess Zaza was an eye-ful. Oriental silks served to accentuate her well rounded figure. Her face, slightly veiled, was marble smooth, her blue eyes like moon-silvered pools above the carmen curve of her lips. When she moved, it was with the grace of a young fawn.

"Please be seated, gentlemen," she said softly, "about the crystal. Now, do you wish a group reading, or individual ones?"

Burlap was edging toward the door. Cactus Hardin grabbed him by the seat of his pants. "Whoa, bashful. You ain't gettin' out o' this. You're forkin' over five bucks like the rest of us. Yuh wanna hurt the young lady's feelin's?"

Princess Zaza's mellow voice was crooning on. She was reading Shorty Dixon's past, present and future in the clear glass ball before her.

"I see a tall man. A top hand waddie, I think you call him. He is so strong like the bull. He can tear a mail-order catalogue with his bare hands. Last year, he saved his horse from a bog, almost losing his life. He

bends the steer's neck in record time at the rodeo. Secretly, he yearns to marry the beautiful woman. He is the Don Juan at heart."

SHORTY DIXON was staring open-mouthed. "By gosh," he stammered, "thass me. Me to a 'T'! Ma'am, you ain't no spirit or somethin', are yuh?"

He shoved a five-dollar bill across the table.

The boys forced Burlap Bates over. "Aw, shucks, fellers," the big fellow gulped. "I—I gotta go. Got some chores to do in town afore we dust back. I—"

"Set!" thundered Curly Blair, in mock anger. He and the rest made the embarrassed puncher plop into the chair before the ball. Burlap's hand shook so he dropped his money in the Princess' lap. Princess Zaza's slim legs came together, preventing the bills from falling to the floor.

"Ah!" the fortune-teller breathed, "the 'andsome cowman! He is of the strong, silent type. He—the crystal is a little clouded—I think he wishes to become an arm of the law. His friends, they tell him he is too slow, trustful. He spends a lot of his time doing card tricks. But he is intelligent, clever. He will go far."

"Hallelujah!" cried Cactus Hardin. "Will yuh look at Burlap's pan! He's got it bad."

So it seemed. As the bunch of them went downstairs to the bar, Burlap acted as if in a dream. Had a far-away look in his eyes, as if he'd suddenly come across an angel. The Crescent Bar men had never known Burlap like that. He usually ducked when he saw a woman coming.

"Princess Zaza," Burlap murmured, gazing beyond him. "That's a pretty name."

The boys kept ribbing him as they trotted back up the dusty street, passing Keplar's Hardware Emporium on the way. From the store porch, a short, slight man in a tipped back chair waved.

"Hi-yuh, boys," he called pleasantly. "How yuh doin'?"

"Hi, Aces," greeted Ted Trowbridge. All the fellows liked Aces Raine. The little man had come into

Piute a short time ago, from the north some place. He had a genial, likeable manner that made you feel you'd known him all your life. "We just now come from the Princess'. Had our fortunes told. You oughta try her. She'll open your eyes, pard, an' I don't mean mebbe."

"Shucks," Aces Raine grinned, "I don't believe in no stuff like that. Can't tell me anybody can read the past er future when they don't know yuh."

"That's because you ain't met her," retorted Trowbridge. "Look at Burlap here. He ain't been the same since."

They spurred on up the street.

At the far end Burlap Bates reined in. "Wanna see the sheriff a second," he explained. "Catch yuh later."

Sheriff Bill Stowe was chewing on a cigar stub over by the window as Burlap entered. He was a big man, with most of his size concentrated on his stomach. He had a red hair fringe which matched his bushy mustache.

He glared over at Bates.

"What in hell you want!" he thundered. "As if I ain't got enough trouble already. I suppose you're still after that deputy job. Well, it's not open to anyone, see. What I want is a gent with go-to-it in his system. A gent who can see through things, and do somethin' about it."

BURLAP swallowed. "You still havin' trouble with them holdups, Bill?"

"Hell!" roared the lawman. "Ain't I jest now said it? Gents are bein' relieved of their pay plumb in the streets. Three of 'em last week, two already this one. I been run ragged tryin' to put a stop to 'em. Old Hepworth, th' mayor, he's been raisin' cain. It's Stowe do this, Stowe do that. If he hadda sweat half his weight off runnin' down clues like I have, he'd— Say! Why in tunket am I wastin' time telling you all this!"

"I dunno," said Burlap, meekly. "Look, sheriff, about that deputy job. If you'd just give me a chance—"

The lawman purpled.

"Get out," he said in a low tense

voice. "Get out before I throw you out." Which was kind of funny, because Burlap was six-foot six, and Stowe around five-seven. "I wouldn't give you a job combin' fleas."

"Mebbe," said Burlap, hastening through the door, "yuh oughta see Princess Zaza. She's beautiful. She might tell you what's gonna happen next."

He was well towards his horse by the time he'd said it.

As was noticed by the citizens of Piute, afterwards, that Sheriff Stowe hung around the saloon a lot. Liveryman Shultz caught him making for the back stairs to the fortune-teller's once.

"Watcha up to, Bill?" he asked curiously. "Reckoned yuh didn't have no time for them ball-gazers."

The lawman crimsoned slightly. "I, uh, gonna see the Princess about her rent," he muttered. "Uh, save her trouble of comin' tuh my office."

But he hurried up when the other had left. Stowe came out of the Princess' place an hour later, beaming, and minus a five-dollar bill from his pants. "Creat little lady," he told himself aloud. "What she said about me is true. I ain't so old, er bad-lookin' at that. Reckon I might shave every day now. Pays a man tuh keep hisself up to snuff."

Meanwhile, the frequent street hijacking continued.

Burlap Bates kept on seeing the Princess Zaza. He saw her so often, folks began to talk. And when they began to talk in Piute town, they really didn't fool. The men folk made fun of Burlap, the women frowned on him.

"That hussy!" chopped old Sarah Hesterberry, bobbing her midget parasol indignantly. "She's got the men her wrapped around her thumb. I hope she hooks Burlap Bates good. Serve him right, for throwin' his hard-earned money away on her like that."

"Humph!" Mrs. Farthington-Swills sniffed, straightened her hair-knot in back. "I told you so. Burlap never did amount to much. He and that woman will make a good pair."

"Well," shrilled little Uny Watson, "I reckon the sheriff'll have some-

thing to say to that." She giggled into her blue handkerchief.

The man referred to was then waddling down the street. Sheriff Bill Stowe sported a red carnation in his shirt front, and a broad smile on his fat face. He was humming a little range song in a sour tenor.

The key to the song shifted when he spotted Burlap Bates striding towards him. Sheriff Stowe puffed up like a big toad, glared at the tall puncher.

"Bates," he said tensely. "I'm tellin' you for the last time to stay away from the Princess. You ain't goin' to see her just for yer fortune. You're moon-crazy about her. Well, you listen to me. The Princess an' me are gonna get hitched, see? She as much as told me she cared, last night. So clear out and tend to yer own knittin', fella. Understand?"

Burlap Bates was chewing methodically on a cedar twig. "Sheriff," he drawled, "I just now had a long talk with the mayor. Seems he ain't at all satisfied with the way you're gettin' after them holdups. Rest of the town ain't neither. Something's gonna be done about it, I reckon."

"Meaning which?" jerked the lawman, bristling.

"Meaning," continued Burlap, unperturbed, "you an' me had better see the Princess pronto. I got a hunch she can give us a lead on them robbin's. Told me the other day the crystal was clearin' more an' more. Stowe, that's the wonderfulest gal I ever laid eyes on."

Bill Stowe nodded. "You tellin' me? Knowed it the minute I met her. But come on. If she's got something to tell about th' holdups, I want to hear it. But you lay offen her after this, yuh hear? Her an' me's gonna be hitched."

The pair passed Aces Raine smoking on the Hardware store porch. "Goin' for another readin' at the Princess'," shouted Burlap. "Wanta drag along?"

Raine dropped his cigarette as if it had burned him. "Huh? Readin'—Uh; sorry, gents, but I got business to tend to."

He got up quickly from his chair, melted in the store's entrance.

"Queer little cuss," commented Stowe, puffing. "Friendly, though."

Burlap was silent the rest of the way to the saloon. There he and Stowe were joined by the Crescent Bar boys, Shorty, Curly and Cactus. Ted Trowbridge caught up with them as they were mounting the steps.

"Figured all of us ought to hear th' readin'," Burlap explained to the sheriff. "Seein' as how we want to help yuh as much as we can."

They all filed quietly into the Princess' place. The young woman herself came from the inner room a moment later, adjusting her veiled head-dress.

HER BLUE eyes lit up through the tin gauze. "Ah! The 'and-some punchers. And the brave sheriff! You wish some more truths from the crystal, my friends?"

Burlap was staring at her intently.

"Princess," he said softly, "we want the lowdown on them holdups. Stowe here's up a tree, the whole town's sore. Can't yuh kinda look inta that little ball and tell us who's behind things?"

The Princess gave a tinkling laugh. "But of course. The crystal knows all. Come in, come in. I will do my best to help you."

They drew up chairs in the curtained room, about the Princess and her crystal ball. Curly Blair and the rest handed over their five dollar bills eagerly. Outwardly, they showed that it was getting the bandit that enthused them so. Inwardly, their hearts jiggled at proximity to this gorgeous creature.

Sheriff Bill Stowe was rearranging his sparse crop of red hair.

Burlap Bates leaned forward anxiously in his chair.

"Suppose you have the ball show us first," he said slowly, "the man Raine. Have it show how Aces, the grinning skunk, got information from the gents in Piute, so he could tell a certain ball-gazer and she could make it look like the real McCoy. Show us how this Aces Raine, if that's his real handle, wasn't satisfied with gyppin' the town, and took to hijackin'. Yuh might show too, how this certain fortune-teller took a lawman for a ride,

fooled him up complete."

Princess Zaza's slim hand was shaking on the glass ball. "I—I don't understand. What you mean when you say—"

"Bates!" jawed Sheriff Bill Stowe, scowling. "You out your head?"

Burlap kept his gaze on the Princess. His usually pleasant face had a peculiar stony set.

"Reckon not, Bill," he said easily. "Princess, I hate like hell tuh do this to a lady, but I guess I just gotta."

With an abrupt, deft flick of his right hand, the puncher snatched at the fortune teller's headpiece, gave it a yank that would have uprooted a mesquite stump. The headdress ripped off, and with the blonde hair, every strand of it. Where the hair had been, glistened the smooth sphere of a definitely bald head.

Princess Zaza was a man!

"Aces Raine!" yelled Shorty Dixon, staring.

Burlap Bates grunted. "Reckoned as much, but wasn't shore. Y'see gents, I figured somethin' was fishy, them holdups, the Princess and Aces all comin' to town about the same time. I thought Aces was too damn chummy, so I felt him out. Give him doped up information about myself, then heard Princess read it back to me later through the crystal. That proved Raine and the Princess was in cahoots.

"But I got a funny idea that maybe they was one and the same gent. Yuh mind the first time we come here, how the Princess closed her lap when the money dropped? Well, a real gal wouldn't of did that. She'd of spread her legs, tightened her skirt to catch it. That really got me to thinkin'."

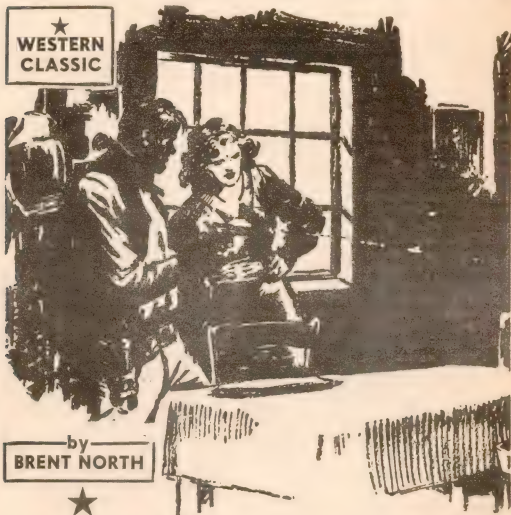
Princess Zaza, alias Aces Raine, crouched frozenly by the crystal ball. The little fellow's smooth face was creased in an ugly grimace, tapered fingers clawing nervously. Suddenly, from beneath his oriental costume, he drew a .38 revolver. Leveled it on the punchers and lawman before him.

"Okay, suckers!" he snarled. "You know everything. But don't get the idea it's gonna do you any good. You
(please turn to page 94)

FOLKS ON the Jubilee range could never quite understand the deep bond of friendship and loyalty that lay between Tom Horn and Gil Farnol. Tom Horn was big, solid, hardworking, with roots planted deep in the soil. Slender, dark-eyed Gil Farnol was wild and reckless; Gil Farnol liked to wear flashy clothes and gamble and drink whiskey. He was proud of his good looks

Tom Horn had done most of the work; Gil had spent a lot of time in Jubilee town, drinking and hell-raising. Lately, Gil had been kicking over the traces worse than usual. He'd really gone hog-wild.

Tom Horn had heard some talk. Gil was running with a bad bunch. He was losing a lot of money, and drinking too much whiskey. Tom hadn't tried to preach to the kid. Gil



by
BRENT NORTH

and his prowess with the fancy gun he wore.

"Got gunpowder in his blood," folks said. "He'll die by a bullet or a hangnoose...."

Tom Horn and Gil Farnol were partners in the Hourglass outfit. It was a swell little ranch, plenty of good grass and water. They'd worked hard to build it up since taking it over a couple of years ago. That is,

Farnol wasn't really bad, he figured, just wild. Left alone, he'd straighten himself out in a little while....

It was long past midnight, and Tom Horn lay staring into the inky darkness of his Hourglass bedroom. Something had awakened him. He'd been sleeping only lightly, for he'd lain awake a long time, wondering why Gil Farnol didn't come home.

Gil had left early that morning,

**"Got gunpowder in his blood," folks said of Gil Farnol.
"He'll die fighting hot lead or a hangnoose . . ."**

saying he was headed for Jubilee and would be back before night. But Gil hadn't returned, and Tom was wor-

ried. He had a premonition that something was amiss.

Tom's big body tensed suddenly,

JUST WILD



Gil's gun
blasted Big
Jorg back on
the bunk.

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as a low sound came to his ears. He knew that sound—the squeaking of the corral gate. The pole corral was down by the barn; and inside the corral were a dozen big, long-legged, thoroughbred horses that he'd bought two weeks ago. Tom was proud of those blooded horses, and he'd been afraid that someday somebody would try to steal them.

Now, quick alarm stabbed at him. He knew from the squeaky sound that the corral gate was being opened—and he'd left the gate securely barred! Swiftly Tom Horn pulled on trousers and boots. He buckled on his gunbelt and cat-footed along the hallway to the open front door.

He stood there a moment, straining eyes and ears. And he knew suddenly that his suspicions had become reality. He saw a moving shadow down there at the corral gate, and heard a low, impatient voice say, "Hurry, damn it—we got no time to lose!"

He heard a rope swish through the air and slash across a horse's rump; heard the horse grunt, and a sharp, pistol-like report as the horse's hoofs hit a corral pole. Another swish, and an angry snarl. "Try to kick my head off, will yuh?"

Swift anger hammered at Tom Horn. Thieves were trying to steal his thoroughbreds!

Silently he crossed the porch and leaped to the ground and a few seconds later he crouched behind a tiny shed and peered around a corner. The shed was no more than seventy feet from the corral gate. There was no moon, but enough light came from the starry sky for him to see clearly what was happening now.

Three saddled horses stood near the corral gate. One man was holding the three horses; two other shadowy figures were inside the corral, easing the restless horses toward the gate. The two men inside the corral had ropes in their hands, and the man at the gate was urging them profanely to hurry.

The rage deepened inside Tom Horn. Three to one—but he had the shed in front of him. Gun in hand, he called, "All right, you horse rustlin' skunks—freeze!"

The man holding the horses spat a startled curse, whirled, and a crimson steamer of gunfire lashed out from his hand. The bullet slashed into the shed wall three inches from Tom Horn's head, spraying him with flying splinters. Then deep-throated thunder from his own gun roared out, and he saw the man holding the horses stagger, clawing at his stomach, then tumbled forward on his face and lay still. The saddled horses reared and whirled, trying to break loose from the dead man who had the reins wrapped about his left hand.

THE TWO shadowy figures lunged from the corral. A deep voice yelled, "Gunter, what'n hell's happened?"

Tight-lipped, Tom Horn called, "I'll show you what happened—if you don't drop your guns and stand hitched!"

The man who had spoken whirled toward the shed, spitting like a cornered cat, and explosions from his gun pounded a crimson, devil's tattoo in the night. Deliberately, Tom fired. The gun stopped blasting, and the man holding it wilted slowly to the dusty ground.

The third man was trying to get away. In his confusion he was running toward the ranch house; running with a weaving, reeling gait. Tom thought, "Might as well make a clean sweep!" and triggered his gun again, aiming deliberately at the running man's legs.

The man stumbled, and fell forward on his face. As he fell, Tom Horn heard him yell, "Tom—Tom, for God's sake, let up!"

That voice pounded at Tom Horn like a mighty fist. Gil—that was Gil Farnol's voice!

He left the shed and ran to the fallen man. It was Gil. Gil sat there on the ground, silent, clutching his hurt leg. Tom lifted him to his feet.

Gil Farnol tried to shove him away. Bitterly, he said, "Damn you, Tom—you shot me!"

"I didn't know it was you, kid!" Tom said dazedly. "Here, I'll get you into the house—you're not hurt bad."

Gil didn't want to go into the

house. He fought fiercely for a moment. But Tom Horn was the more powerful of the two. Suddenly Gil Farnol stopped struggling, and Tom lifted him into his arms and carried him into the house. He made a light.

The bullet had jored through Gil's thigh. Gil Farnol was white-faced. He seemed bewildered, like a gent who had just awaked from nightmarish sleep.

Tom remembered the two dead men out there on the ground, and asked, "Kid, what in God's name happened—and who're them gents outside?"

"Coupla hombres name of Jube Gunter and Ike Hornbock," Gil muttered. He raked a hand across his dull eyes. "I—they're outlaws. We—some-thin' happened in town, but I ain't quite sure just what. I was drunk..."

Tom Horn started to speak, then closed his lips slowly and stood listening, his eyes flashing. In the night outside there was a rising sound of hoofbeats. The hoofbeats clattered to a halt outside the house. Tom heard loud, startled voices.

"That'll be the law," Gil said. But he didn't try to get away now. He sat and stared at Tom Horn, bitter accusation in his dark eyes. "They'll send me to the pen, mebby a hangnoose. And you did it, Tom. We just wanted a change of horses to make a getaway on. You killed Gunter and Hornbock, and shot me, so I couldn't get away. Damn you, whatever happens will be your fault!"

Boots thudded in the hallway, and four or five gunbelted men came into the room. At their head was grizzled, rawboned old Jason Baxter, sheriff of Jubilee. The old lawman looked from Tom to Gil Farnol; looked at Gil's wounded leg.

He asked, "Tom, did you do this—did you salt them two jaspers outside?"

Tom nodded miserably. "I—I made a mistake."

Sheriff Baxter shook his head. "Wasn't no mistake. You done a danged good job. These three—Hornbock, Gunter and Gil Farnol—just dynamited the vault of the Jubilee Stockman's Bank and gutted it. Old

Sam Teck, the nightwatchman, saw 'em as they rode away from the bank, and recognized 'em. He tried to stop 'em, and they shot him. He lived just long enough to tell who pulled the job. Gil, you wild, crazy young fool, why'd you do it?"

Gil said nothing, just sat staring bitterly at Tom Horn....

So, for robbery and murder, they sentenced Gil Farnol to twenty years in the State pen.

Gil had no defense. He, Hornbock and Gunter had been drinking and playing poker all day and most of the night. Gil had lost a lot of money; he'd written some worthless checks. When Hornbock and Gunter had proposed blasting the bank vault—when they'd promised to cancel all Gil's debts and give him a split of the bank money if he'd help rob the bank and furnish fresh horses for the getaway—he'd been too drunk and desperate to refuse. He didn't know who'd killed the night-watchman; he didn't remember anything about it.

BUT NO CARTRIDGE had been exploded in his gun when he was arrested, and that brought leniency. "But you are at least guilty of robbery," intoned old Judge Tarrant, "and for that you must pay your debt to society. Have you anything to say before you go?"

Gil shook his head. He stood, lean and defiant, sullen hate and contempt in his eyes as he listened to the sentence. As Sheriff Baxter led him from the court room, Tom Horn placed a hand on his shoulder and grinned, "Twenty years ain't such a long time, ol' son. You just hang and rattle—I ain't never gonna rest till I get a pardon or parole for you!"

Gil Farnol flung the hand fiercely from his shoulder.

"I don't want any help from you!" he spat. "It's your fault I'm goin' there—and I'd rather rot than know you'd helped me. What's more, when I do get out, I'll be lookin' you up. Don't forget that!"

They pulled Gil away. And Tom Horn stood there, a hurt, bewildered look in his eyes. He couldn't savvy Gil Farnol. But Gil's hating him

wouldn't make any difference. Gil Farnol was still his saddlemate....

The first few months were the hardest for Gil Farnol. Despite his wildness, he had fiercely loved the sunlit plains, the cool mountains, with the wind and sun against his face and the clean, blue sky overhead. Now, shut away from these things—shut away behind those bleak, wind-lashed gray walls huddled there on the edge of the desert, he thought he would go mad. Heat and silence and slavish labor—and soul-rotting loneliness.

Gil Farnol was steel-hard. It wasn't so hard to stand the kicks and curses of the brutal guards, the back-breaking labor. But the stinking filth and brain-cooking heat, the wind and sand and silence—he dreaded these things. Most of all he dreaded the *santanos*—periodic waves of wind-driven sand that shrieked and howled out of the desert, lashing and beating at the stone walls, sifting into food, water and clothing. And a *santana* meant endless hours in a narrow, dust-choked cell, listening to the bellowing of the wind.

For Gil Farnol death would have been easier. But he didn't break. He wanted to live, to go back to Jubilee and kill Tom Horn. Tom Horn, he'd told himself a thousand times, had known who he was that night. Tom Horn had tried to kill him, so he'd have the whole ranch for himself. Deep in his heart, Gil knew that that wasn't true. But it was something to feed the flames of hatred and bitterness in his heart; it was something to look forward to.

During the first few months, Tom wrote often. Gil read the first letter. Prospects were good on the Hourglass. Tom was taking care of everything, looking forward to the day when Gil would come back. Tom didn't say anything about his shooting Gil; expected Gil to realize it was an accident.

Gil read the letter through; he sat a long time, face gray and taut, remembering. Then savagely he tore the letter to tiny pieces and ground them into the cell floor; fiercely he cursed Tom Horn. And after that he destroyed Tom's letters without

opening them. Once, three months after they sent him up, Tom came to see him, eager eyed and happy at the prospect of seeing his old sidekick again. But Tom Horn stayed only a few minutes. He went away, the eager light gone from his blue eyes, sobered by the gaunt, heat-warped ghost of Gil Farnol—appalled by the savage hate in his bitter eyes, by the harsh curses that Gil hurled at him from between tight lips.

After that, Tom came no more. And he stopped writing.

For a while, Gil missed those letters, even though he had destroyed them unopened. Somehow, they'd seemed like the last connecting link between this blazing soul-rotting hell and the freedom that he so desperately longed for.

BUT ESCAPE, from State, was counted almost impossible. On three sides of the little prison town was open, thickly populated country. On the west the waterless, heat-blasted desert reared a flaming barrier. Of the possible dozen men who had scaled the prison walls, they all had chosen the desert as their only chance for escape. And the bones of three fourths of them bleached white under the savage sun, a ghastly mockery of the dreams of freedom of those other damned souls behind the wind-lashed walls.

Five years passed. Eight. Gil Farnol saw the Hell-House break other men. Saw them wilt and die of hopelessness, or go mad and crash their brains out or attack a guard in berserk rage and be brutally shot down. But Gil was tougher than the sand and silence and hot gray walls. He withstood the heat and cold, the wind and silence and unrelenting labor, living for the time when he would go back to Jubilee....

Gil was in his seventh year when they brought Big Jorg Devlin in. Big Jorg had been sent up for life, from Gil's own home range, the Jubilee, for bank robbery and murder. He was massive of head and body, flat-faced, arrogant. He swore they'd never break him, and they didn't, up till the time he escaped a year later.

For some reason, Big Jorg was

drawn to Gil Farnol, maybe because they'd known the same country. Gil, however, disliked the big killer from the first, distrusted him, despite their many confidences exchanged in the tight-lipped jargon of the Big House. Big Jorg had been a member of Tusk Harl's outlaw gang, with a hideout up in the Thundergust Hills north of Jubilee. He told Gil just where the hideout was, and how to get there.

"I'll meet you there," Big Jorg grinned, "when we're outa here."

"We ain't got wings, have we?" Gil grunted.

Big Jorg looked all about him, carefully. "We won't need 'em," he said. "Never was a place that couldn't be busted. Listen..."

And he told Gil of the plan that he and Kirk Vane, another lifer, had hatched. Vane was a wiry, rat-faced little gent that Gil disliked even more than he did Devlin. But he listened to the plan, a brief flare of hope in his dark eyes.

The plan was all right—so far as getting them outside the walls was concerned. "Then there'd be the desert," he pointed out. "Yuh couldn't beat the desert, without water, and yuh couldn't take water outa here."

Big Jorg cursed harshly. "We'll beat the desert! Hell, I thought I was doin' you a favor, lettin' yuh in on this. You looked like a gent who was willin' to take a chance..."

"I'm willin' to take more than a chance," Gil said softly. "But I don't think we'd have one, that way. If we got outside the walls, we'd never make it across the desert, and that's the only way. I've got to have somethin' better than that."

So, when Big Jorg and Vane made their daring break, he stayed behind. He knew it was mostly because he didn't trust the two hardened lifers. He'd always been more than willing to take a chance. "Gunthunder in his blood," folks had said. "A hangnoose or a bullet'll get him!"

Big Jorg and Vane made their break from the quarry yard, at mid-evening, just as a yellow *santana* was moaning and whooping in from the desert. Just as a loaded truck was making for the gate of the yard, the two lifers suddenly clubbed a couple

of guards over the heads with pieces of cut-rock. They seized the guards' guns and, holding the half-conscious men between them and fire from the buckshot loaded man-killers in the hands of other guards, made it toward the open gate.

The attempt was reckless, foolhardy, one that could have been made only by desperate men who were willing to gamble life against freedom. But the very sudden recklessness of it got Big Jorg and Kirk Vane outside the walls. After that, it was the desert, more than trailing men, that they'd have to conquer.

Whistles suddenly shrieked out their strident warning. Waves of yellow sand rolled in. A man-killer belled out from a corner tower. There was a confused uproar as other guards herded the howling and cat-calling convicts toward the cells. Gunfire, the wild, weird wailing of the prison siren, thundering gusts of wind.

Back in his cell, Gil Farnol listened to the scream of the siren. Fierce thrills raced through him. Almost, he wished he had made the break with Big Jorg and Kirk Vane. Hours passed, and he knew they had not brought the two lifers in. Big Jorg and Vane were still out there, battling the savage, heat-blasted desert....

A LITTLE more than a year later, Gil Farnol faced the gaunt, gentle-eyed old prison warden in his office.

"You're leaving here, Farnol," said the warden kindly, "after serving only eight years of your twenty-year sentence. The Governor is granting you a pardon. The judge who sentenced you, and numerous other persons on the Jubilee range, recommended the pardon. But it is mainly through the tireless efforts of the sheriff of Jubilee that you are now a free man. I know you don't want advice, but I'm offering it anyhow. These eight years are behind you—forget them if you can. Don't leave here with bitterness and hate in your heart, with the idea of getting even. Get an honest job, and stick to it."

"Who'd give a jail-bird a job?" Gil asked sardonically.

"See the sheriff in Jubilee," the warden advised. "He's your friend, he'll take care of you. You don't belong here, Farnol. Some men are born criminals, will die bad. Big Jorg and Kirk Vane, for instance, who escaped more than a year ago. Stay clear of their kind, Farnol, and you'll be all right."

"Is that all, Warden?"

The warden nodded, gripped Gil's hand in a firm clasp.

Free! But it wasn't exactly as he had dreamed it. Broodingly, as he stared from the window of the train that was carrying him southward at the wintry landscape, Gil regarded the panorama of sweeping plain and towering mountain, the tinkling streams and herds of cattle with tails to the wind.

Home! But the bitterness and vengeance-lust that gnawed like ravaging rats at Gil Farnol's heart wouldn't let him see the golden beauty and peace of it.

Gil left the train at Frye's Junction, ten miles north of Jubilee. Not far away, the Thundergust hills lifted dark and unfriendly against the chill gray sky. Up there was the hideaway of Tusk Harl's outlaw gang, where Big Jorg Devlin and Kirk Vane probably were right now.

Gil had some money that the warden had been keeping for him for eight years. He bought a rangy dun horse, a pair of long-barreled forty-fives, a second-hand but serviceable range outfit to take the place of the cheap prison suit he wore. He felt better then. Little thrills shook him as he caressed the gun-butts.

The sky was low and overcast as he rode out of Frye's Junction, and a biting wind blew down from the hills. The feel of snow was in the air. Gil stopped a mile south of the Junction, where the trail forked, although he'd already decided which way he'd ride. One branch went on to Jubilee, the other crawled like a wounded snake off toward the hills.

As he hesitated there at the forks of the trail, Gil Farnol thought of what the warden had said: "The sheriff is your friend, he'll take care of

you." Gil had puzzled a great deal over that. He'd never counted old Jason Baxter, who'd testified against him in court, a particular friend.

He thought of Tom Horn and the Hourglass outfit. The Hourglass, of course, was still half his. Tom was too damned honest and loyal to pull anything underhanded; Tom would have made the outfit pay during these eight years. He, Gil, would have money in the bank and sleek cattle on the winter range.

But Gil had decided he wouldn't go back to Jubilee—not for a while, anyway. He still hated Tom Horn, he told himself; still thought of Tom as being the cause of those eight years of hell. And he hated the Judge, and the twelve jurymen who had adjudged him guilty of robbery and murder.

Memory churned his heart with fresh bitterness. He spurred the dun suddenly down the narrow trail—toward the tawny hills.

But, as he rode, he didn't feel just right. That feeling of fierce triumph that he'd anticipated, was missing. He felt like something was trying to pull him back. He kept remembering Tom Horn's open, happy grin, the days and nights he'd spent with the big, bashful cowboy. Like—hell, almost like he wanted to see the big ape!

He spurred the dun viciously on.

HE COULD hear a low moaning sound up beyond the hills. A blizzard was brewing, and he knew the deadly fury of the blue blizzards that swept the Thundergusts. He urged the dun on faster, pulling his sheepskin coat about his gaunt face.

Soon after he entered the hills a drift of sleety snow started. The blasts of wind became colder, and a blue-black twilight settled over the hills. The gloom deepened in Gil Farnol's heart as he rode deeper among the storm-lashed hills; as he visioned the future with Tusk Harl's outlaw gang—days of peril, lonely nights of brooding in the red glows of hidden campfires, with maybe a nameless grave in the wilderness at the end....

The gloom deepened, the snow thickened. The whooping wind cut

like a knife. The blizzard's fury filled the hills with weird, crying noises.

The storm fitted Gil Farnol's somber mood. Chaotic thoughts filled his mind. In turning outlaw, he was fighting what he considered the law's blindness and injustice in the only way he knew. By joining up with Tusk Harl and Big Jorg, he would be able to fight back at Tom Horn, at the jubilee ranchers.

A spark of light showed suddenly through the driving snow. The dark bulk of a big log cabin loomed, huddled back under the wind-breaking walls of the canyon which Gil had been following for the last twenty minutes. Nearby were two or three smaller shed-like structures. The hideout of Tusk Harl's gang, Gil knew.

Without trying for silence, Gil dismounted, slogged through the loose snow to the door and rapped. Footsteps sounded inside, and the door was flung abruptly open. Big Jorg Devlin's massive figure stood limned against the dirty lampglow behind him, a six-gun in his hand, shoulders hunched forward as he peered at Gil.

Big Jorg grinned suddenly, growled, "Gil Farnol, by Gawd! Come on where it's warm. Men, here's the gent I been tellin' yuh about!"

Gil went into the warm, lighted cabin. His gaze flicked about the room. Three other men, besides Big Jorg, were in the room, seated about a rickety table that held a guttering lamp, a deck of greasy cards, and a quart whiskey bottle. One of the men was Tusk Harl, squat, powerful, with stiff reddish hair sprouting from his hawkish face and stub-fingered hands. And the wiry, rat-faced Kirk Vane. The third man was lean, dark-faced, with icy, calculating eyes.

Instantly Gil sensed something tense, unnatural, in the way they acted. They were staring at him, hands on gun-butts. But there was a distant, vacant look in their wolfish eyes, like they were having trouble focusing their minds on him.

Then he saw the reason. Over against the far wall was a bunk, and on the bunk was a girl—a slim, golden-haired girl whose blue eyes were wide with nameless dread, whose

beautiful face was blanched and tight with the fear that clutched her. Dusky shadows skulked about the bunk, but Gil saw the flare of hope that came to her desperate eyes as they probed at his face.

A faint stirring of memory prodded Gil Farnol as he looked at the girl, the feeling that he had seen her before.

"Hell, Farnol," Big Jorg laughed coarsely, "she ain't no ghost! Here, get some whiskey inside yuh, and somethin' to eat, and I'll tell you about it. You cross the desert, like me and Kirk did?"

Gil took the whiskey bottle that Big Jorg held out to him. "I was pardoned," he said shortly, watching the girl. He took off his sheep-skin coat, and stood near the glowing potbellied stove.

"This gent wants to join up with us," Big Jorg said to the burly outlaw boss. "I knew 'im in the pen—he's okay."

Tusk Harl licked his thick lips, growled, "He's too late. You know damned well we're fixin' to split up, and get outa the country. We cain't stay here—after this."

Gil strove to hold his voice careless. "Who's the girl?"

Big Jorg's greedy little eyes turned toward the bunk.

"That's Sheriff Tom Horn's sister!" he chuckled.

BIG JORG'S words, like powerful blows, pounded at Gil Farnol. Then, suddenly, he knew where he had seen the girl. Once, almost ten years ago, Tom Horn's kid sister, Elaine, had come out from Denver to spend a week at the Hourglass. A gawky, long-legged girl with pig-tails. She had hung around Gil Farnol a lot, during that visit, had thought him pretty much a hero; she'd cried and kissed him good-bye when she left.

He jerked his mind back to the present, asked, "Since when did Tom Horn get to be sheriff?"

"Four-five years back, after old Jason Baxter was gunned. He's been hell on law and order, too. He's the hombre that hounded me to the pen, and he swore he'd get the whole

bunch. But I guess he'll talk turkey now, since we've got his purty sister with us."

Gil fought down the sudden anger that surged over him. "What's she doin' here?" he demanded.

"Two days ago, we gutted the Jubilee bank, cleaned 'er out down to the floor. Ike Mooney, over there, had been in town gettin' the lay of things. He'd found out that this skirt worked in the bank and that she was the sheriff's sister. So, when we'd cleaned the bank, we brought her along. It was my idea. We left a note in the bank for the sheriff, tellin' him that if he trailed us into the hills he'd never see her ag'in. Slick, huh?"

"Slick as hell," Gil Farnol agreed, and grinned. But the four renegades couldn't know the confused thoughts that were tumbling through his brain, the inexplicable rage that was churning inside his heart. He asked, "You've got her—what now?"

Big Jorg grinned wolfishly. "Why, we've decided to split up and get outa the country, just as soon as this blizzard lets up. Couldn't but one of us take the girl along. We was lettin' the cards decide who got her, when you showed up."

For the first time, Gil noticed the four small piles of matches on the table. Matches—but the stake was a lovely, golden-haired girl with terror in her young eyes!

"We're wastin' time," clipped the cold-eyed Ike Mooney, impatiently. "Jorg, it's your deal!"

"Too bad you cain't take a hand," Big Jorg grinned. He went to the table, dropped onto the box he had vacated. "This game won't last long—make yourself comfortable."

Gil had moved away from the stove, into the shadows, to escape the desperate plea in Elaine Horn's blue eyes. He saw now that her ankles were bound with rawhide thongs.

As the long minutes dragged, he listened to the bleak beat of the blizzard about the cabin, to the low flick of cards, the growled curses of satisfaction or disappointment as luck changed among the four wolf-faced gamblers. The lust in their hot eyes, the fact that they were gambling for

the girl, sent fierce anger surging like a muddy flood through Gil Farnol's heart. His lean face was haggard, lined with the battle that raged inside him.

Silently he cursed himself. He had hated Tom Horn, lived through eight years of hell buoyed by dreams of vengeance—and here was his chance for a more savage vengeance than he had ever dreamed about. But still he couldn't feel that fierce triumph that should have been there.

Memories plagued him. Incidents of other days, as he rode side by side with Tom Horn, paraded through his brain. The time when a bunch ganged him in Ysleta, and Tom arrived and waded with bludgeon-like fists drumming his righteous anger among them; the time when he'd fished Tom from a raging stream with a wet lari-at. Other occasions, as they barged through trouble or fun, always together. Then he remembered that gawky, long-legged girl with hero-worship in her wide eyes as she followed him about the Hourglass; the feel of her shy young lips on his as she took her reluctant departure for Denver.

But Elaine Horn wasn't a gawky, long-legged kid now—and she was in deadly peril!

And Tom Horn was sheriff. Like Big Jorg had said, the blond buckaroo had always been hell for law, if not so much order. Tom knew Tusk Harl's and Big Devlin's breed—he'd be somewhere in these storm-tortured hills, right now, looking high and low for the skunks who had carried off his sister.

GIL FARNOL stirred restlessly, darted a glance at the gamblers. Big Jorg and Vane had been eliminated from the game; they watched sullenly the slow, tense play between Tusk Harl and the icy-eyed Ike Mooney. Occasionally Big Jorg glanced at the slim form of the girl on the bunk. Finally he got to his feet and went over and stood looking down at Elaine Horn with a loose-lipped grin. Gil, watching, saw the girl recoil slightly from the giant, saw her gaze come quickly to him in desperate appeal.

The instinctive decency in Gil Farnol struggled with the bitterness in his heart. He tried to think of the eight years of hell he'd endured. He was tasting vengeance, and the savor was bitter as gall.

Tom Horn had been his saddle-mate, had worked eight years to get a pardon for him. And this slim, golden-haired girl was Tom's sister, was the shy, gangling kid who had cried as she kissed him good-bye almost ten years ago....

The girl's sudden scream jerked Gil Farnol to his feet. Elaine Horn was cowering in terror back against the wall. Big Jorg Devlin stood over her, one hairy paw outstretched, his thoughts naked in his eyes.

Gil's voice was flat, taut with the rage and contempt that lashed at him: "Jorg, you lousy snake, turn around!"

Warned by the deadliness of that voice, Big Jorg pivoted, clawing for his gun as he whirled. Gil's own gun came out fast, and its red lance of flame blasted Big Jorg back across the bunk.

Hard on the bellow of his gun, Gil heard the girl's warning scream. He twisted aside, eyes swiveling to the table. Harl, Vane and Ike Mooney had reared to their feet. Mooney's gun was already clear, snaking up, and Gil felt its fiery breath on his neck as he ducked. He smashed into the wall, regained his balance and braced himself on wide-spread legs.

The room rocked red with gunfire as the three renegades leaped apart and started triggering their guns. Gil Farnol faced them, his scarred guns snarling their red requiem, grinning. A fierce thrill of joy surged over him. For the first time, since leaving the pen, he felt free.

Kirk Vane clawed at his stomach, went reeling about the room. Tusk Harl and Mooney stood close togeth-

er, wrapped in spirals of powder-smoke from their booming guns. Then suddenly Ike Mooney dropped his gun from limp fingers and slumped forward on his face.

At the same instant red-hot pain seared at Gil's head. A black wave of nausea rolled over him. He spun back against the wall, fighting to clear his head, to throw off the paralyzing pain that held him helpless. Through boiling mists of agony, he saw Tusk Harl's savage, triumphant grin. He saw the outlaw's gun lowering on his head.

Sudden, smashing sound beat at him from across the room. Amazed, he saw Tusk Harl spin round and round, then crash heavily to the floor and lay still.

Gil's gaze turned to the bunk. Elaine Horn was sitting upright, almost on top of Big Jorg's inert body, and Big Jorg's smoking .45 was gripped steady in her hand.

Gradually Gil's brain stopped whirling, the nausea left him, and he knew that the bullet had merely slashed a shallow groove alongside his skull. He stood a moment, staring through billowing gunsmoke at the golden-haired girl.

Elaine Horn was smiling slightly, a happy, almost proud light in her blue eyes as she looked at Gil Farnol.

"I knew you'd come through, Gil," she said softly. "And I stopped being afraid, the minute I saw you. You see, I remembered—that Gil Farnol I'd known, ten years ago. Why don't you untie me, so I can bandage your head?"

Gil didn't say anything as he went toward the slim, blue-eyed girl. He was too happy. He felt just like any man, who has been gone a long time, and comes back to find home a sweeter, better place than it was before he went away.... ●END

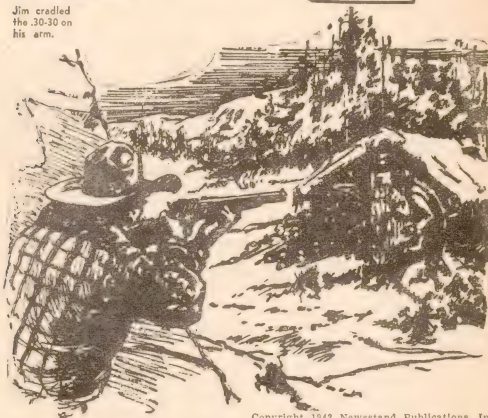


THE COLD-DECK CLUE

by KEN JASON

★
WESTERN
CLASSIC

Jim cradled
the .30-30 on
his arm.



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Back in Montana Jim Marshall had known manbreaker murder, but this brand of .30-30 slaughter was beyond what he'd ever notched his gun for!

JAMES MARSHALL braced himself against icy snow particles that stung suddenly into his face. He wiped freezing moisture off his chin and probed with his mittens to clear an icecrust from beneath the ear-lobes of his parka. The sky had disappeared entirely. A grey, endless shroud of bleak, dark storm bore down upon him.

Jim took his bearings and shifted closer to the frozen stream-bed. Sergeant Gilbert had advised him to follow. Perhaps the Mountie had

been right. Maybe he should have waited at Frozen Creek till the storm was over.

But the letter Jim's father had written was urgent.

"It'll take a good man to make Fox Creek in a blizzard," Sergeant Gilbert had cautioned. "Don't stop for anything. Once you stop in a snow storm, you'll freeze."

The Mountie had seen that Jim was determined and he had spoken a little more encouragingly. "It's sixteen miles to your father's trap

line. If you can keep moving, you'll make it by midnight. But if the storm gets bad you may not make it at all. Hug close to Frozen Creek. You can scrape snow off the ice and ice will mean you're on the creek, Where Frozen Creek joins Fox Creek your dad's cabin sits to the right. Grit Calbern's got a shack half a mile to the left. He's the only other trapper in that country. He don't get along very well with your dad, but it's handy to reach any man's cabin when you're lost in a storm."

Jim wasn't anxious to end up at Grit Calbern's cabin, though. His father's letter had said:

Dear Son:

Wish you'd come up here before winter sets in. I've laid a line of traps on Fox Creek. Got a black fox pelt last week and there's other crossed breeds of great value up here. My only trouble comes from a fellow named Calbern who's threatened to kill me a couple of times. This fellow had a trap line on Wild Goose Creek before I came.

Guess he never thought of working Fox Creek. But now that I'm doing well on it, he claims the whole territory and has ordered me out. You can depend on it, I'm not going. And I wouldn't be worried except that this hombre is mean and he's a coward. He won't fight fair. I'm afraid he'll dry gulch me as we used to say in Montana.

There's plenty here to keep us both busy. You can make more money trapping than you can punching cows around Fort Benton. The black fox I bagged is worth five hundred. There's plenty of red foxes and a lot of high-grade mink.

Affectionately,
Your Dad.

Jim's dad, although he was nearly fifty now, was no man to cry for help. He wouldn't write like that unless Calbern was damn dangerous.

Jim Marshall hurried on in a delir-

ium of suspense and apprehension. He didn't know what he might find at Fox Creek but he did know he'd feel better when he saw his dad and knew he was safe.

In his haste he hardly noticed how fast the slashing snow piled on the frozen ground and blotted all sign of a trail. At first he could follow the stream-bed. But, as he went along, the land leveled. He became conscious of an increasing delusion that he was plunging along in the lowest groove of the terrain when actually the ground sloped to the left or the right. By midafternoon, he was weary and fatigued. The cold was increasing. The short twilight came early and increasing wind sobbed and moaned through the sparse growth along the creek's course.

The snow's stark whiteness reassured him. It kept night from blotting out the terrain. By taking Sergeant Gilbert's advice, he kept on the frozen stream.

The snowfall slackened with increasing cold. The wind became stronger. It picked up particles of frozen snow and stabbed them into his face.

HE LOST track of time and fought against an uncontrollable panic. Husky, young and robust though he was, Jim knew he could not successfully fight the storm much longer. He fell, rose again and struggled forward. Progress was painfully slow; he stopped often to probe for the ice of the creek and he knew complete exhaustion. The dreaded contentment of warmth and drowsiness tried to claim him. He was in danger of freezing.

There was about a foot of snow now. Beneath it was the smooth friendly ice. The temptation to rest upon it and sleep grew greater. The ice told him, at least, that he was not lost and it seemed to hold something of comradeship.

He crawled forward slowly. The ice stretched on, then turned. He realized now that the stream suddenly was at right angles to its previous course. He was in a deeper ravine. There was a bank on each side of him.

Jim struggled to his feet. He brushed the rough fur of his mittened hand across his eyes and stared, half snowblinded to his right. He thought there was a darker shadow in the dreary gloom of the snowy scene. He forced his brain alert, took quick mental note of the snow-clad scene about him to be sure he could find his way back to the stream if the thing he saw should prove to be nothing but a snowy mirage.

He forced his failing strength to push his tired body up the slope of the hill. His lungs ached from effort. His eyes burned. He moved in a kind of hopeful, prayerful frenzy. And the darker blotch was really there in the snow. Jim Marshal had reached his dad's cabin.

He got up to it, leaned against it, fumbled his way to the door. He tried to hammer against it. He found a wooden catch, lifted it and his dead weight against the wooden panel pushed him inside.

Jim was like a man in a dream now. It seemed a long time before he realized that the cabin was empty, that his father was not there. He was too weak and exhausted to make the mental effort of thinking about it at first. He kicked the door shut. The glare of the snow through a tiny window helped him find a box of safety matches on the window sill. He found wood, dry and ready, in a box behind an air-tight heater that stood in a corner. Protected now from the cut of the wind, relieved of the effort of making progress through the fast-drifting snow, Jim managed to get a fire going. He found a big soup kettle in a small cupboard and had regained enough strength to drag himself to the door and fill it with snow. Then he sat back from the heat and bathed his frozen hands and cheeks with the snow. Toward morning, he felt enough revived that he dared to let himself sleep.

When James, Marshall awoke a strong glistening light shone into the cabin across the sun-glared snow outside. He shuddered with a sudden realization of chilliness and knew

by that that his danger of freezing was past.

He had to relight the fire and while he did it, a sense of impending tragedy came over him. His father's heavy coats and two extra parkas hung on nails near the stove. A thirty-thirty rifle leaned against the wall. A few dirty dishes and a pan half-filled with rice-curry stood on a rough wooden table. These things had the look of having stood several days.

Jim knew his father had owned two rifles. He looked carefully about the one-room shack for the .35-40. But he failed to find it. He did find, however, a much-thumbed account book. His father had kept on its ruffled pages a record of the furs he had taken from his traps. From the arrangement of the items, Jim surmised his father used the book also as a memorandum of the day of the week and the date. There were entries for every day up to and including November 1st. This was November 5th.

Jim laid the book aside absently. He walked slowly about the cabin carefully examining each little detail. Finally he stopped by the window and stared out across the snow. His eyes, wandering aimlessly over the landscape, suddenly riveted on a tiny spot that he could see a long way off across the creek.

Jim realized at once that he was looking at Grit Calbern's shack. Sergeant Gilbert had said Calbern's place stood a half mile to the left of the creek. It had not occurred to Jim until now that one could see that far in the cold clear air.

THE SHACK looked like little more than a huddled white heap in the snow. But a tiny wisp of smoke arose from it. The darker outline of its eaves confirmed its identity.

Jim involuntarily gripped his strong hands into curled-up fists. He could not shake off the feeling that his dad had met with foul play. If there had been foul play there was slight doubt that Grit Calbern was behind it.

He found food in the cabin,

forced himself to be patient while he prepared it. Strength flowed back into him quickly. He could feel the warm blood tingling through his veins. Warmth and nourishment not only revived him, they increased both the anxiety regarding his father and his deep suspicion of the man who lived across the gulch.

Before he stepped out in the snow, Jim looked carefully to the .45 he had brought with him from Fort Benton. He dropped it into an outside pocket. As he pulled the warm parka down closer over his ears, he stepped back inside and took up his father's .30-30 rifle. He examined it carefully, also, made sure it was loaded and in proper condition.

Now that he was rested, and it was daylight, the half mile trek through the snow was not hard. Grit Calbern had evidently seen him approaching. The man stood outside on the step of his shack. Jim stopped a few feet away to look the fellow over before he spoke. He shifted the .30-30 easily to the crook of his left arm. He wanted his right hand free near the pocket that held the .45.

Grit Calbern somewhat resembled an enormous bear. His head was almost round. It was covered on top with thick, upstanding wire-like hair. His face was so bewhiskered that his tiny eyes seemed to sit behind his face and to stare out over his bulky nose and large flabby chin. There was something gorilla-like about the man. This impression was accentuated by the fact that he did not look straight at Jim but seemed to stand with his head slightly sideways so as to stare at an angle.

"What you doin' in this country?" he demanded gruffly before Jim had a chance to speak.

Jim did not answer at once. There was no way Calbern could know who he was. He decided to let it ride that way.

"I came to visit Mike Marshall," he said.

Calbern's eyes blinked once or twice. No other expression showed through his dirty whiskers. But his voice became softer.

"Ain't seen Marshall for several days." The tone of Calbern's voice somehow reminded Jim of the low whine of a panther's snarl. "Come inside, where it's warm," the trapper invited almost too cordially.

As Jim stepped into the warmth of the cabin a sudden sickening stench assailed him. His brows knit in puzzlement. He cast a quick glance about the place, at the same time watching Calbern with one eye and maintaining a firm, ready grip on the rifle. Grit Calbern had something about him that made Jim Marshall feel as if he were about to be stabbed in the back.

He saw at once what was causing the stench. Thirty or forty mink pelts hung on wires across the pole rafters of the room. They evidently had been treated with salt-peter and alum and were now in the first stages of the curing process. The heat and foulness of the room was almost unbearable.

Calbern said nothing more immediately.

Jim walked about the room appearing to examine the pelts curiously. But his mind was absorbed in concern for his father. He was considering how best to approach the subject to get at the truth, when his head bumped against a long black skin that hung specially low from the ceiling.

"That's a black fox," Calbern's low, almost bestial voice explained. "Caught him three days ago, just before the big freeze. It's a perfect pelt; worth a thousand dollars."

An unaccountable tingling sensation ran along Jim's spine. He raised his hand and ran it along the sleek black fur of the pelt. He glanced at the fox's long sharp teeth as he let the tiny claws slip through his fingers. Jim did all this subconsciously, hardly thinking of the fox. One of the fox pelt's front paws remained between his fingers as he said, "Do you suppose something happened to Marshall?"

CALBERN grinned. "Likely." He shrugged. He appeared coldly disinterested.

Jim's fingers, absently holding

the fox's paw, slipped past the tiny front claws. His eyes fell to look more closely at something his fingers had inadvertently discovered. Calbern had said the skin was perfect. But it was not quite perfect. Then Jim's mind rushed back to the terrifying thought of his father's disappearance and his hand let go of the pelt.

"It seems to me," he said almost accusingly, "if Marshall disappeared unexpectedly, you'd be out looking for him. In such an out-of-the-way place you two must have been pretty dependent on one another."

"I looked around one day," Calbern said listlessly. "It ain't my fault if a man goes and loses himself."

Jim stepped closer to Calbern. "Didn't you like Marshall?" he demanded sharply.

Calbern glanced up, again giving Jim that odd impression of holding his head side-wise and staring at a slant. "Yeah, yeah," the ape-like man said leisurely. "Him and me got along all right. We never had no trouble."

Jim stood studying him, trying to hold down hate and suspicion within himself. Calbern looked strong as a grizzly. Their conversation had led unescapably to the conclusion that this bear-like fellow was none too bright mentally. But what Calbern lacked in mental alertness, was made up by his physical strength and brutality. Jim understood, more clearly than before, why his father's letter had read as it had. He knew why his father had requested help. Calbern was a man capable of knocking the heads of two or three ordinary men together with his bare hands.

This realization, however, only increased Jim's determination. "I'm Jim Marshall," he announced unexpectedly. "I believe you know something about what happened to Marshall. I happen to be his son."

Calbern's pig-like eyes seemed to grow even smaller. "Why would I know any more about him because you're his son?"

Jim's uncanny feeling of distrust of the man was increasing. He held

himself in a ready position while he reached in his pocket for his father's note. Calbern watched curiously while he unfolded the letter and spread it on the table. He wagged his great head stupidly, shrugged his powerful shoulders.

"I can't read," he said.

Jim stared at him in some astonishment. He felt a deepening disgust.

"Dad says in here," he said, placing his forefinger on the letter, "that you threatened to kill him several times."

Calbern did not grow angry as Jim had expected. The man's reflexes seemed too slow to comprehend. "I can't help what your father wrote," he said in his flat, listless monotone.

Jim decided he was wasting time. He stepped toward the door. "All right, Calbern," he said threateningly. "Dad's trap-line is mine now. You stay away from it. Stay away from my cabin."

Calbern grinned almost foolishly.

"I won't bother you none." There was now the same low, animal-like whine in Calbern's voice that Jim had noticed before.

Jim swung around. He stepped down into the frozen snow and moved rapidly toward his father's cabin. He had gone perhaps a hundred feet, when something impelled him to turn and look back. Calbern stood in the doorway raising a rifle.

Jim swung around, quickly unslung his father's .30-30 from under his arm. But Calbern lowered his gun. The ape-like trapper raised his hand and waved.

"Good-bye," he called, grinning awkwardly, "I see you sometime again."

Jim slowly cradled the .30-30. He backed up and moved sideways down toward the stream. The man had intended to kill him, to shoot him in the back, in cold blood. Jim felt sure of it. He knew now how his father had felt. He knew what it meant to have an enemy whose mind was but a fragment of a normal mind. He would have to act and act quickly. If he could prove Calbern had murdered his father...if he

could prove that, go for Sergeant Gilbert and swear out a warrant.... But that would be a hard thing to do.

Jim Marshall slept little that night. The uncertainty concerning his father tormented him. Even worse, however, was the feeling that he might be killed while he slept. Jim had fought some hard fights in Montana. He knew how to use the big .45 that he carried. But never had he faced a man like Calbern.

The night finally passed. He rose at the first streak of dawn, prepared a hasty breakfast. The weather was still cold. But the sky had cleared. Jim dressed warmly, pulled on the thick parka and, taking the .30-30 under his arm, broke trail through the new snow to the creek-bed.

FINDING his father's traps was not as hard as he had feared. The smart old trapper had slashed small tree trunks or hung black and white cloth flags near each trap. Jim was not overly experienced but he had trapped some in Montana. In the traps, he found several good mink. From signs around the closer traps, however, he could not escape the conclusion that catches had been removed since the freeze-up that had occurred three nights before. Foot-prints did not show on the frozen ground. There had been no disturbance since the snow-fall.

As he followed the creek he examined the ground around each trap. He was not interested in the catch. Nor did it bother him to disturb the trap, even though it would prevent a successful catch for some time to come. He was becoming more and more excited. He had discovered that near each trap, when he scraped the new snow carefully away, he found his father's footprints.

"Dad," he reasoned to himself, "made his last entry in the ledger on the first. That was the night the freeze-up came. That's why his last foot-prints are frozen near each trap." Jim was also able to discern animal tracks near the traps. Those made before the freeze were frozen fresh and clear. Tracks made the

previous day, both his father's and those of animals, were more blurred and indistinct.

At last Jim came to a trap that had been set in a low dip where the creek-bed ran between two small bluffs. He found the boot-prints of another man beside his father's. Jim examined them closely. But there was no sign of a struggle. He also examined the animal tracks very closely around this trap.

Suddenly he distinguished the soft, round, ball-like impression of a fox's paw. His breath came faster as he examined it. For half an hour he studied the ground near the trap. Then he moved on.

At the next trap he found no sign of his father's boot-prints. The marks there were not fresh enough to have been made at the same time as the others. Jim stood up and stared a long time straight ahead. He could not quite make it out. His father had come as far as the trap he had just passed but had not come as far as this one. He had seen no tracks pointing back toward the cabin.

Jim turned. He retraced his steps. As he approached the trap he had left a few minutes before, he almost fell over a heaped mound in the snow. He saw now a human shape crudely outlined. He had stepped over it from the other side and it looked like a log.

With trembling fingers, Jim reached down and turned it over.

He straightened, almost unable to restrain a shriek of sick, panicky terror. This stiff frozen corpse was all that was left of his father.

Jim knelt beside it. Tears came to his eyes. He wept unashamedly. When he was able, he examined the body carefully and found that the skull had been crushed by a blow from some blunt weapon.

Jim rose. He stood staring toward Calbern's cabin. Never before had he known the desire to kill. Now the lust was upon him. He felt a savage pleasure in the thought of the big .45 bucking against his palm, the heavy slugs burying themselves in Calbern's brutish body. Quickly, however, his grief submerged the first

unreasoning spasm of hate that had swept him. He forced coherent thought to his reeling brain:

His father had been slugged near the trap where Jim had seen the fox tracks. Calbern, if Calbern was the murderer, and Jim had no doubt that he was, had dragged the body a few feet. Perhaps he had intended to bury it the next day. But the freeze had come. The temperature had dropped to zero within a few hours.

This was all pure conjecture. But in Jim's mind, it stood up. He realized that he could not immediately care for his father's remains. So, stifling the hot anguish of his grief the best he could, he hurried back toward the cabin.

It was still intensely cold. But there was no more snow. Jim was familiar now with the trail to Frozen Creek Trading Post. With a last glance toward Calbern's cabin, still carrying the .30-30, he set off.

NOW THAT there was no snow to blind him, it was easy to follow the Creek. He had gone only a few hundred yards, when the shrill whistle of a bullet startled him. It was followed immediately by the sharp report of a rifle. Jim stopped. He threw himself flat on the snow, squirmed his body around and raised the .30-30.

His eyes searched the white landscape. But he could detect no sign of an attacker. No further sound came. Only the slight crackling caused by the occasional movement of a frozen bush or the low whispering swish of the light breeze. Jim Marshall crouched there and shook from the rage within him. Calbern had fired that shot. Jim was sure of it. Jim's body had been slipping and jolting along in the snow; he had been a poor target, and the bullet had missed.

The attack was not renewed upon him. At dawn he reached Frozen Creek Trading Post and found Sergeant Gilbert.

The Mountie listened attentively. He was a square-shouldered clear-eyed young fellow. He had a pleasant personality. A remarkable degree of strength and determination ema-

nated from him.

"You get a few hours' rest," he advised Jim. "I'll have an extra horse ready at ten o'clock. We'll go back to Fox Creek together."

Jim wanted to start at once. But the Mountie was adamant.

"Calbern can't destroy the evidence," he maintained. "He can't bury that body or drag it away in the snow without leaving a trail. Besides, you've got to have rest. With a man of Calbern's character we don't know what we may be going up against."

The two men made the trip that afternoon in rapid contrast to Jim's first slow, hazardous journey on foot. They reached Mike Marshall's body just before dark. It had not been disturbed. Nor had they seen any sign of Calbern.

Jim showed Gilbert the fox tracks near the trap.

"The evidence suits me," Gilbert said grimly. "Let's go and get him."

A half hour later they approached Calbern's shack.... It was after sunset now. But the white-covered earth gave a glaring light to guide them. A thin curl of unbelievably blue smoke spiraled from the trapper's stove-pipe chimney.

Jim carried the .30-30 in the crook of his left elbow. His fingers were clasped around the butt of the .45 in his pocket. As they stepped up near the porch Gilbert cautioned, "Keep yourself in hand, fella. I know how you feel toward this man. But it isn't our policy up here to use weapons if it can be avoided. I'll arrest him, then we'll take him back to Frozen Creek Station."

Jim glanced at the Mountie. He admired the cool, calculating determination of the man. But he couldn't help thinking Gilbert was overly confident.

Suddenly the shack door opened. Calbern stepped out on the steps. He had no weapon. He even smiled. If the wrinkling of his whiskered face and the glint of his pig-like eyes could be called a smile.

"Come inside where it's warm," he invited. Jim was conscious of the same overly-strained pleasantness in the man's voice that he had noticed before.

They stepped inside.

The Mountie went directly to the black fox fur that still hung from the ceiling. After taking the front paw in his hand and examining it briefly, he reached up and jerked loose the string that held the pelt to the pole rafter.

"I'm taking this pelt as evidence," he announced flatly. Turning to Calbern he said, "I'm placing you under arrest and charging you with the murder of Mike Marshall!" The Mountie stepped forward holding the pelt in his left hand, reaching to his belt for a pair of handcuffs at the same time.

Calbern's expression did not even change.

"What's the fox got to do with it?" he asked in a bewildered tone.

THE MAN'S apparent dumb indifference threw Jim and the Mountie both off guard. Gilbert held up the fox pelt, took hold of its paw.

"This fox," he said, "was caught in a trap once before. A toe is gone on its right forepaw. It made tracks in the mud before it stepped in Mike Marshall's trap. This same fox made those tracks. Marshall's body lays less than twenty feet distant. You killed Marshall to get the fox pelt and so you could trap along both creeks. You didn't bury the body before the freeze-up and young Marshall happened to get here in time to catch up with you."

Jim stepped closer to look again at the fox's paw. For a brief second they were off guard. Calbern moved with unbelievable speed for a heavy man. His great right fist caught Gilbert under the ear. The blow was like the wild swing of a grizzly's paw. Its terrific force hurled the Mountie's body against Jim with a force that upset him.

Jim tried to jerk the .45 from his pocket. But his right side struck the floor so violently as to pin his arm beneath him. His knuckles, caught between the gun and the floor, were numbed senseless. Fires of pain stabbed at his shoulder. He knew his arm had been broken.

Gilbert's body rolled limply to one

side. The Mountie was unconscious. But as Gilbert's body rolled, his left arm swung over across Jim's face. The fox pelt wrapped itself half around Jim's throat. Then before Jim could raise himself Calbern's great heavy body was on top of him, holding him down, crushing him into the floor.

Jim saw the brute's piggish eyes gleaming a few inches away. He felt Calbern's hot breath. The ape-like creature's knee gouged into his groin. All he could do was claw back and strike futilely with his left hand.

The fox pelt got tangled around his fist. Lying flat on his back, he could not strike effectively. With a supreme effort he shoved the fox pelt into Calbern's face, kept shoving it upward with all his strength, hammering the giant brute with the wasted strength of his broken arm and giving him short body-blows with his left fist.

Then, for a moment, the weight on Jim's chest was relieved. Calbern reached out and grabbed up the .30-30 that the force of his fall had wrested from Jim. Calbern spit and sputtered; he blinked his eyes. Holding the gun by the barrel he raised the stock over his head.

Jim got to his knees. He saw the rifle stock coming down. He tried to twist sideways. The gun-stock struck his battered shoulder. Sudden sickness stabbed at the pit of his stomach. But he got to his feet and leaped back.

Jim got the .45 out of his pocket. Calbern had raised the butt of the rifle again. He ran forward at a crazy angle and struck the rifle butt against the wall with a force that splintered the stock. Calbern turned and rushed in a new direction. Jim sidestepped easily. He realized now that Calbern was blind. The man was running about the room aimlessly. Drops of water fell from the end of his nose. Big tears flowed out of his eyes.

Jim never knew why he didn't kill the man. But he didn't. He twisted the .45 in his hand and took hold the barrel. With all the strength he had left, he cracked the butt down

on Calbern's thick head. The big man slumped to the floor. Jim got Gilbert's handcuffs and shackled his wrists.

WHEN THEY were finally back at the Frozen Creek Trading Post, when Calbern had been turned over to Gilbert's superiors and taken away for trial, when Mike Marshall's remains had been laid tenderly to rest, Jim turned to the stout-hearted Mountie who still stood beside him. He extended his hand.

"Thanks," he said simply.

"You better go back and set up your dad's trap lines again," the Mountie said kindly. "You won't need to fear Calbern again. When a man goes up for trial in this country, he gets what he's got coming. For Calbern, that means the rope." The Mountie's eyes grew almost tender. "As for thanking me, I figure it's me that owes you the thanks. If you hadn't knocked Calbern out he'd have killed us both."

Jim stood a moment thoughtfully. "Yeah," he said slowly. "It wasn't me, though, that did for Calbern. It was the alum and salt-peter that had soaked into the grease in that fox pelt. If that oil hadn't got in his eyes, he'd have done for us both."

The Mountie smiled. "Justice," he said. "Rather odd when you think of it. The fox that he stole had lost a toe and that is what will convict him. The alum-filled oil from its tiny body saved both of us."

Jim stood soberly a moment considering it. His heart was heavy with grief and disillusionment.

"I might as well work dad's trap lines a while," he finally decided and with a heavy step he moved off once again in the direction of Fox Creek. It was hard, it was unfair and unjust that Jim should have lost his parent in this tragic way. But it was the way of the frontier and the way of strong men was not to complain. Jim Marshall's step firmed as he moved on down the trail. ●END

THE SHERIFF TRIES TWIN SIXES

(cont'd from page 75)

ain't jailin' me! Just you and that pot-bellied sheriff set quietlike, don't move. I'm leavin'. Through with this hick town anyhow. Steady now. If you want to see another Christmas, don't make no play for those guns."

HE BACKED from the room, could be heard racing down the steps outside. Bill Stowe and the others flashed to the windows, fired at the retreating figure. Aces Raine vaulted astride a pony at the hitch-rack, soon was a blur of dust at the other end of the street.

"Skipped, dammit!" groaned Cactus Hardin.

Burlap Bates blew the smoke fog from his gun muzzle. "Let 'im go. He won't show his nose around here no more."

"But hell's fire," Ted Trowbridge wailed, "that snake's got most o' my month's pay in his jeans. Daggone the daggoned—"

"He ain't got much," Burlap said quietly. From his pocket, he drew a bundle of bills. Fives and ones. "I sorta eased 'em out when he wasn't lookin'. Sleight of hand stuff, yuh

know. I went through his pockets when he was dressed as a man, too. Reckon he ain't got much dough t' speak of now."

Shorty Blair sort of collapsed in a nearby chair. He looked like he wanted to faint. "I'll be a slant-eyed grass-hopper," he said weakly.

Sheriff Bill Stowe drew Burlap to one side.

"About that marriage business between me an' the Princess," he whispered. "Forget it, for gosh sakes. If the boys was ever to know I really fell for— Listen, yuh kin have that deputy job. You kin have any damn job yuh like. Only for the love of Mike, don't talk. Don't even think of what a fool I made of myself."

Burlap was fingering the crystal ball "Princess Zaza" had left hastily behind. He was staring thoughtfully into its clear surface.

"Reckon I wasn't cut out for no deputy," he opined. "Yuh know, Bill, it wouldn't be half bad, this fortunetellin' racket. Reckon I might give 'er a fling, just for the hell of it." ●END

GRAVEYARD GUNS

by GUNNISON STEELE

JUST BACK from a fence-fixing job on the south part of the Slash L range, blocky, red-haired Pinto Boone stepped into the doorway of the log cabin ranch house—and abruptly rocked back on his heels, a

feeling of cold shock inside him. Wiry, gray-bearded old "Limpy" Greer, Pinto's partner, lay sprawled grotesquely there on the cabin floor, one side of his shirt red and wet!

Pinto leaped into the room and

This wasn't a job for the law, this was strictly a gunchore, this would take a pair of Colts with filed triggers and preferably a gent who knew how to fan 'em!

★
**WESTERN
CLASSIC**

"All right,
turn around
and I your
hand!"



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turned old Limpy over. Limpy was unconscious, but breathing jerkily. Blood from the ugly bullet hole in his side had made a puddle on the floor. Quickly Pinto picked the oldster up and placed him on a bed.

"Lash Krugar done it, I reckon," he muttered savagely. "Krugar came for a showdown, like he swore he'd do, and he shot Limpy. From behind, too, blast his skunk-y soul!"

He heated water, and cut away Limpy's shirt. When he applied hot water to the raw wound, the runty oldster stirred and groaned, and his pain-filled eyes opened briefly. He stared dazedly up at Pinto. His breathing was loud and ragged.

He muttered, "That you...kid?" "Me," Pinto said. "What happened, Limpy?"

Limpy's eyes were closed again, and for a moment Pinto thought he was again unconscious. Then Limpy whispered, "Snake—shot me—from behind. Took cow money—bureau drawer..."

"Who done it?"

Limpy's lips moved, and his words were barely audible: "Lash Krugar—don't try to—" The words dribbled away, and Pinto knew that now he was unconscious again.

HOT ANGER rioted through Pinto Boone as he bandaged the wound and applied liniment. Limpy's mumbled words had confirmed his suspicions: It was Lash Krugar who had treacherously shot Limpy Greer. Krugar owned a little cow outfit ten miles to the west on Timberwolf Creek. Two weeks ago, Limpy and Lash Krugar had quarreled bitterly over a line fence between the Slash L and Krugar's place. Krugar had sworn he would fill Limpy with lead the next time he crossed the line fence.

Now, looked like Krugar hadn't waited for old Limpy to cross the fence. Limpy's rheumatism had been bothering him lately, and he'd stayed at the cabin alone today. Krugar, finding him alone, had shot him—had obviously ridden away thinking Limpy was dead. Pinto remembered

Limpy's mumbled words: "Took cow money—bureau drawer—"

He went hurriedly to an old bureau, opened a drawer and rummaged under a mass of clothes. He withdrew his hand slowly, his eyes hard and bitter. Three days ago they'd driven a big bunch of beef stuff to the loading pens in Saddle Bow and sold them. They'd brought the money home—nearly two thousand dollars—aiming to invest it in a herd of purebreds from the big Jinglebob outfit to the north. They'd put off the trip till Limpy's rheumatism was better—and now the money was gone.

Pinto stood there a moment, thinking. He was furiously angry, but his mind was clear and cold. This wasn't a job for the law—it was something he had to do himself. He could go to Sheriff Sam Torget in Saddle Bow, and Torget would arrest Lash Krugar, all right—but, that way, Krugar might get off with a prison sentence. And a man who would do what Krugar had done here didn't deserve a chance to live.

Pinto went to the bed and stood looking down at Limpy. The oldster's breathing was easier now and not so loud. He was pretty sure that Limpy would be all right, until he could get back and go for a doctor, at least. This was something that had to be done now, before Lash Krugar maybe got scared and lined out.

He went outside and to the barn. He resaddled his wiry buckskin, mounted and rode to the west, driven by cold purpose. He didn't bother to look for any trail Krugar might have left; Krugar would be at his place, where he lived alone, unless he had already started running.

The sun was sinking down toward the blue hills. Pinto Boone rode fast, his freckled face grim, one thought in his mind—to kill Lash Krugar. The law wouldn't touch him for that, when it became known what Krugar had done.

The sun was setting as the red-head approached Krugar's two-room ranch cabin. The cabin and sheds, hemmed by dark pines, huddled beside a shallow creek. Pinto could

see no sign of human life about the place, except for a plume of smoke curling from the cabin chimney. Obviously Krugar, after his murderous work, was preparing supper.

Pinto dismounted and left the buckskin in a jackpine thicket behind the cabin, and went forward afoot. He wasn't in a humor to give Krugar more than an even break. By now the sun was down and shadows were gathering swiftly. He approached the cabin on a windowless side. He paused briefly, hugging the wall, and from sounds inside he guessed that Krugar was busy over the stove.

He eased along the wall. The kitchen door, at the back of the cabin was open. Pinto stepped suddenly through the doorway, hand near the butt of his old range six-shooter, peering in the deeper shadows at the squat, powerful figure at the stove across the room. The man, a sizzling skillet in his hand, had his back to the doorway.

FLATLY, Pinto Boone said, "All right, Krugar—turn around, and fill yore hand! I'm givin' you more of a chance than you gave pore Limpy!"

The man at the stove seemed to explode like a stick of dynamite. He leaped aside, snarling like a startled cat and whirling in midair. He flung the hot skillet straight at Pinto, grabbing with the same incredibly swift movement for his holstered gun.

Pinto didn't try to dodge the skillet, and he felt the fiery stab of hot grease at his face. But already his six-shooter was out, blasting, and a red streamer lashed across the shadowy room at the squat man. The close-range bullet drove the killer back against the hot stove. He recoiled, half turned, then fell forward to the floor on his face, his unfired gun falling beside him.

Pinto stared warily through coiling gunsmoke down at the figure. Then he went slowly forward, stooped and turned the man on his back. It was almost dark there, in the cabin. He fumbled for a match,

struck it and stared down at the face of the man he had killed.

And suddenly Pinto Boone felt like a tide of icy water had washed over him. The dead man wasn't Lash Krugar—it was a young, dark-faced hombre he had never seen before!

The match winked out, and Pinto crouched there a moment, stunned, unbelieving. He had killed a stranger, an innocent man! The dead man was blocky, powerful, like Lash Krugar; his back had been turned, and it was shadowy there in the cabin. But those things didn't lessen the shocking fact that he had killed an innocent man—that, in the eyes of the law, he would be guilty of murder!

Slowly, Pinto got to his feet. Wariness returned, and he examined the vicinity carefully. But he found no sign of Lash Krugar. He could find no clue as to who the dead man was, nor why he had been here in Krugar's cabin.

Appalled by what he had done, most of the fierce anger and hate had drained out of Pinto. His showdown with Lash Krugar would have to wait. He went to the barn, and in a stall he found a saddled dun, munching grain. The dun, he guessed, belonged to the dead man in the cabin. He led the dun out, tied the dark-faced young hombre to the saddle, retrieved his own buckskin from the nearby thicket and headed with his grim burden back toward the Slash L.

He had no thought of ducking responsibility for the killing. He'd made an inexcusable mistake, and he'd take the consequences. He would stop by the Slash L, to see if Limpy Greer was all right; then he would ride on to Saddle Bow, where he would turn the dead man over to Sheriff Torget and explain what had happened.

As he neared the Slash L, quick surprise struck at him. A light was burning inside the cabin! Which meant that somebody besides old Limpy was inside. Pinto dismounted and tied the two horses in the darkness at the corral gate. Leaving the dead man on the saddle, he went toward the cabin.

2-GUN WESTERN—15 BIG STORIES!

A saddle horse, a powerful black, stood at the hitch-bar before the cabin. The black, Pinto knew instantly, belonged to Sheriff Sam Torget. The gloom deepening inside him, he entered the lighted room.

Rawboned, walrus-mustached Sheriff Torget sat in a chair beside the bed. Limpy Greer was conscious, and he looked stronger, although worried. Relief flooded his face as he saw Pinto.

"By ganny, kid, I'm glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "I been worried sick. I was afraid you'd gone out to look for Lash Krugar."

"I did," Pinto said. "I aimed to make him pay for puttin' that bullet in you and stealin' our cow money."

LIMPY groaned. "Krugar didn't do it!"

Pinto stammered, "W-what! But you said—"

"I know what I *tried* to say. But I passed out ag'in before I could make it plain. I savvied, unless I told you the straight of it, you'd naturally think it was Krugar that shot me, because of that quarrel we had. What I meant to tell you was that Lash Krugar didn't do it. He stopped by here this mornin', all right—to say he was plumb sorry about that fuss. We patched everything up, and I found out Krugar is a plumb white gent.

"His son, from over in Texas, is comin' to visit him, and Krugar was on his way to Saddle Bow to meet him. He wasn't plumb sure, though, whether the boy would come in on the stage or across country."

It was Pinto's turn to groan. "Oh, my gosh—then I reckon it was

Krugar's boy I killed!"

"What's that?" the sheriff demanded sharply. "You say you killed somebody?"

"It was kind of dark in the cabin, and I thought it was Krugar," Pinto said miserably. "We shot it out, and I killed him, and then I found out it wasn't Krugar. He was at Krugar's place, so I reckon it was Krugar's boy. Sheriff, I made a dumb mistake, and I'm ready to take my medicine."

"Where is this dead man?"

"Outside, tied to his saddle. I'll go get him."

He got up and went outside to the hitched-up horses.

Fighting down a panicky impulse to jump on his horse and line out, he untied the dead man, carried him into the cabin and placed him on a bunk. He stepped back, so that the lamplight fell across the dead man's dark, hawkish face.

For a moment there was stark silence. Then old Limpy swore, and let out a weak yell.

"Hell's hinges—that ain't Krugar's boy! He's the mangy skunk that shot me and stole our cow money!"

"You—you plumb sure of that?"

Sheriff Torget was looking down at the dead man.

"I'm sure of it," he said grimly. "That's the Sangre Kid, a plumb bad hombre I been trailin' all day. He killed a couple of men down at Kaid's Ford two days ago, and there's a thousand dollar bounty on his scalp." He stooped, probed with his fingers inside the Sangre Kid's shirt. "On top of that, I reckon your cow money's here in this belt he's wearin'. Kid, for a gent that goes off half-cocked, you shore hit the bull's eye this time!" ● END



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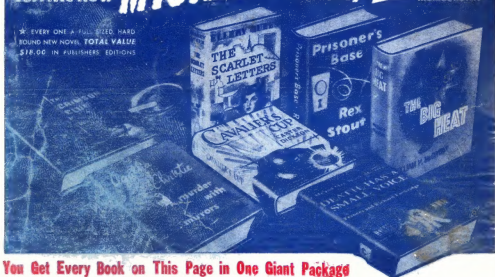
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